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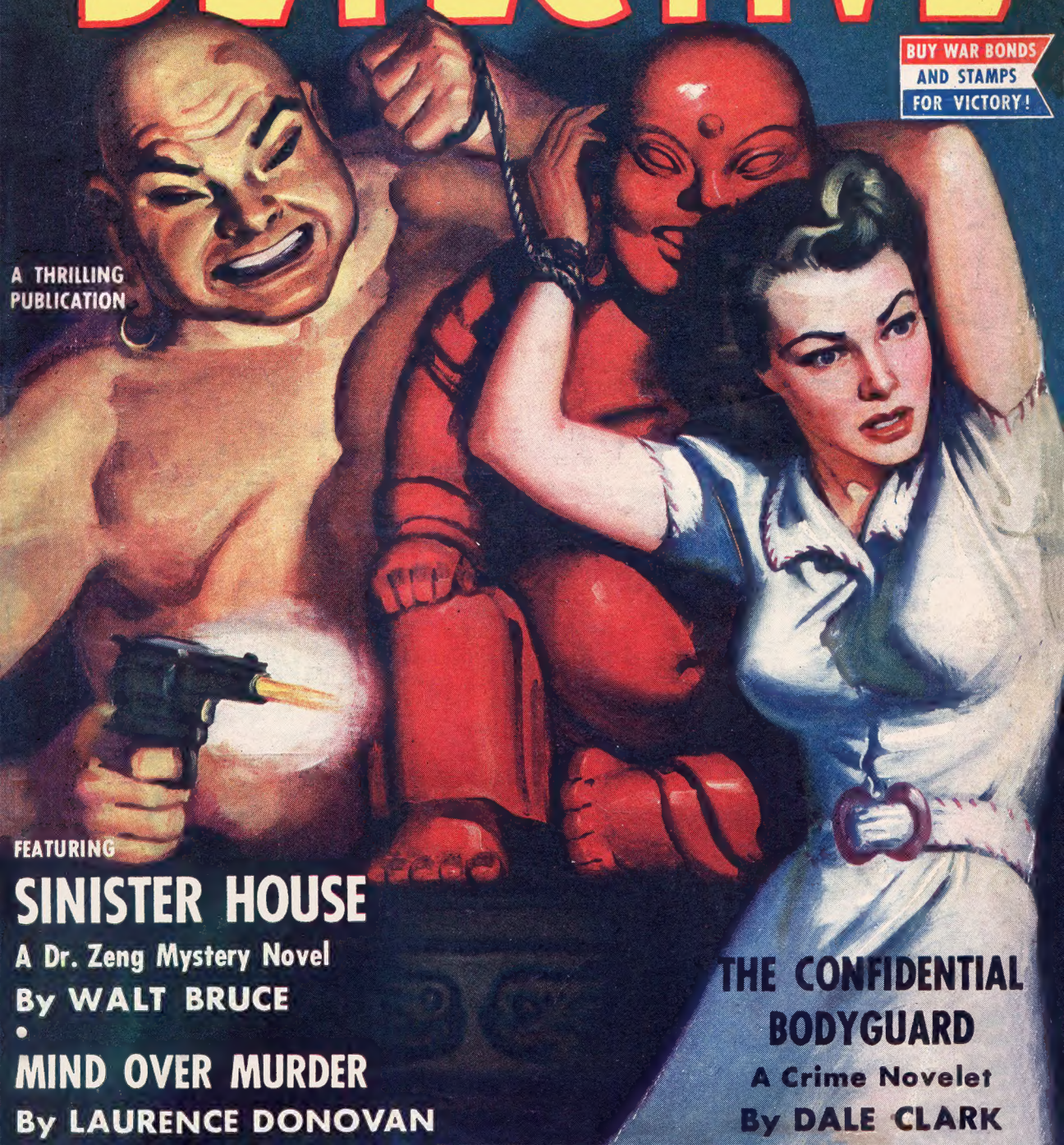
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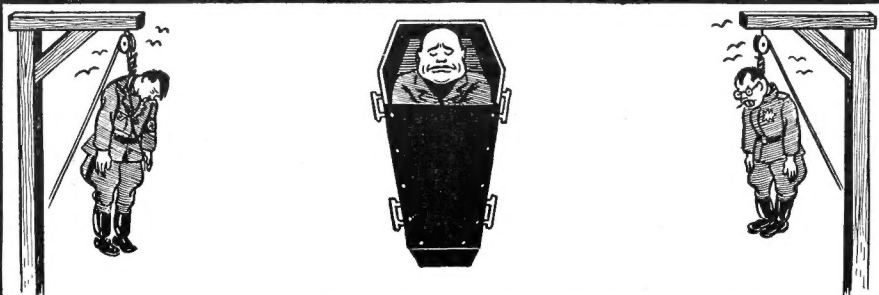
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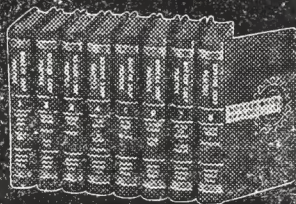


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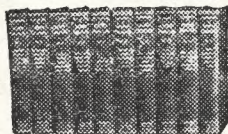
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October, 1942



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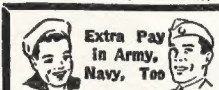
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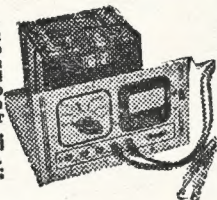
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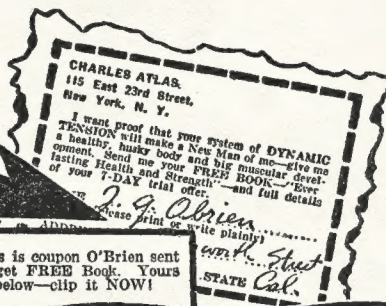
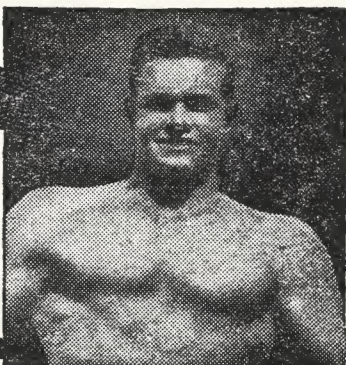
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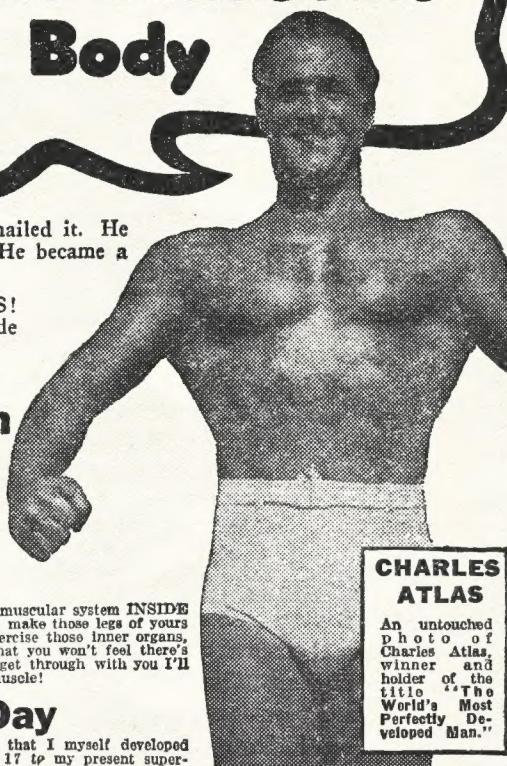
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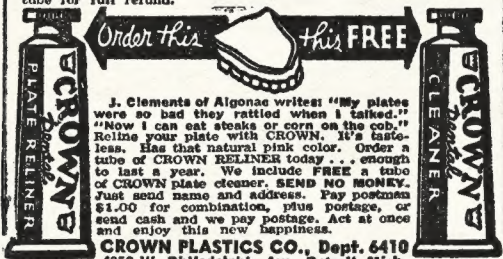
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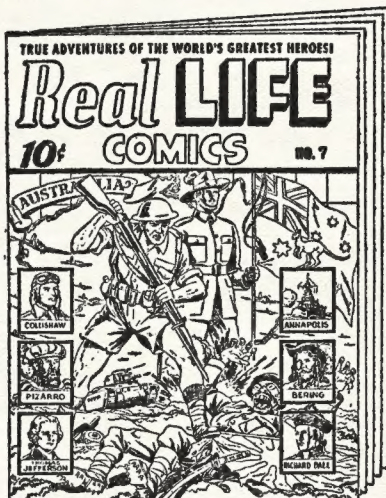


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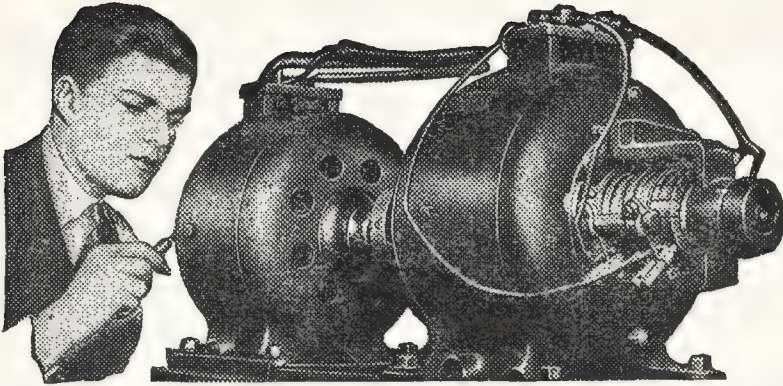
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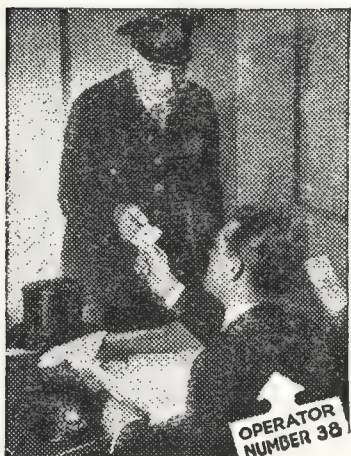


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SINISTER HOUSE

By WALT BRUCE

The mysterious Dr. Zeng Tse-Lin wrestles with a weird crime problem when a wraith stalks the abandoned old Vorbling mansion—and real bullets fly!

CHAPTER I

FLAME-GHOST

FLAMES licked like greedy dragon tongues at the night sky over San Francisco's Nob Hill, where a landmark of the city's fabulous past was being destroyed. Through billows of rising smoke and milky swirls of fog the red glare deepened, while an insistent crackle of burning timbers made eerie accompaniment to the throb of pumps

slamming useless tons of water into the conflagration.

Everybody realized that the ugly old Vorbling mansion was doomed. The firemen knew it as they battled the blaze, and so did the newspaper reporters who watched the unequal fight. Yet nobody was particularly sorry to see it go. For the structure though it might be a landmark, was an eyesore as well—a rococo and tenantless relic of the ornate Eighties, with all the architectural blun-

A BAFFLING COMPLETE MYSTERY NOVEL

ders of that artificial era.

Acrid fire-fumes stung the nostrils of Jimmy Calvin, staff photographer on the *Morning Globe*, as he jockeyed through the crowd for a more favorable position from which to focus on the holocaust. Snapping his Speed Graphic and then making the customary "protection" shot with a minicam, he thought of the mansion's somber history. He recalled the story of the Vorbling family curse, and the legend of the restless Vorbling ghost.

Not that Jimmy Calvin believed in such supernatural tales. But in conjunction with this fire, they would make banner headlines in tomorrow's *Globe*. Especially if his pictures turned out well. That was the thing he had to concentrate on.

He saw an opportunity for an unusual angle shot and seized it. For the moment, nobody stood guard at the base of the fire tower from whose top a smashing stream of water was being aimed into the ill-starred residence. Jumping at the chance, Calvin swarmed up the tower until he was on a level with the third floor of the house. Sparks drifted around him as he triggered a close-up with his press camera.

And then, when he automatically switched to the minicam for a covering shot, he saw something that brought a choked cry of amazement to his lips. Directly before him was an attic window. And framed in that window he beheld a bearded, haggard face staring out at him with the most agonized expression he had ever seen on a human.

FOR a split instant Jimmy Calvin couldn't believe his own senses. The Vorbling mansion was vacant. It had been vacant for a decade. No one, not even a caretaker, had lived in it since the violent death of the second Pieter Vorbling. Yet there could be no doubt about it—a man was in the attic, looking out hopelessly at the *Globe* photographer.

Even as Jimmy Calvin mechanically clicked his minicam, an angry bellow reached him from the street far below.

"Hey, you! Climb down out of there! Who gave you permission—"

It was a battalion chief roaring through a sawed-off megaphone. But Calvin needed no such irate command to bring him scrambling down the tower. He was already on his way, slipping and sliding in swift descent. He gained the pavement, pivoted to face the furious fire department official.

"Save the harsh words for later, Chief," he panted. "There's somebody up there in the top floor of the house, trapped. I saw him through a window!"

"You're either crazy or plastered, Calvin. Nobody's been in the place for years. Get back past the lines before I call a cop and have you pinched."

Jimmy Calvin stood his ground, obdurately.

"I know what I saw. I'm telling you there's a bearded guy—"

At that very moment, fingers of flame burst through the tindery roof and leaped skyward, swirling, stabbing crimson gashes in the fog and smoke. The roar almost drowned out the sound of Calvin's protests.

The battalion chief made a grim mouth.

"There she goes! The whole works will cave in pretty quick, now. I couldn't send a rescue squad in there even if I believed you. I'd be guilty of murder."

"Murder's the right word!" Calvin snapped, even though he realized the fire official was acting for the best. "You're deliberately letting a man die!"

"Look, Jimmy," the chief said gently. "You've just made an honest mistake. If there were a bearded guy up there, why doesn't he smash the window and call for help? At least we could use the net."

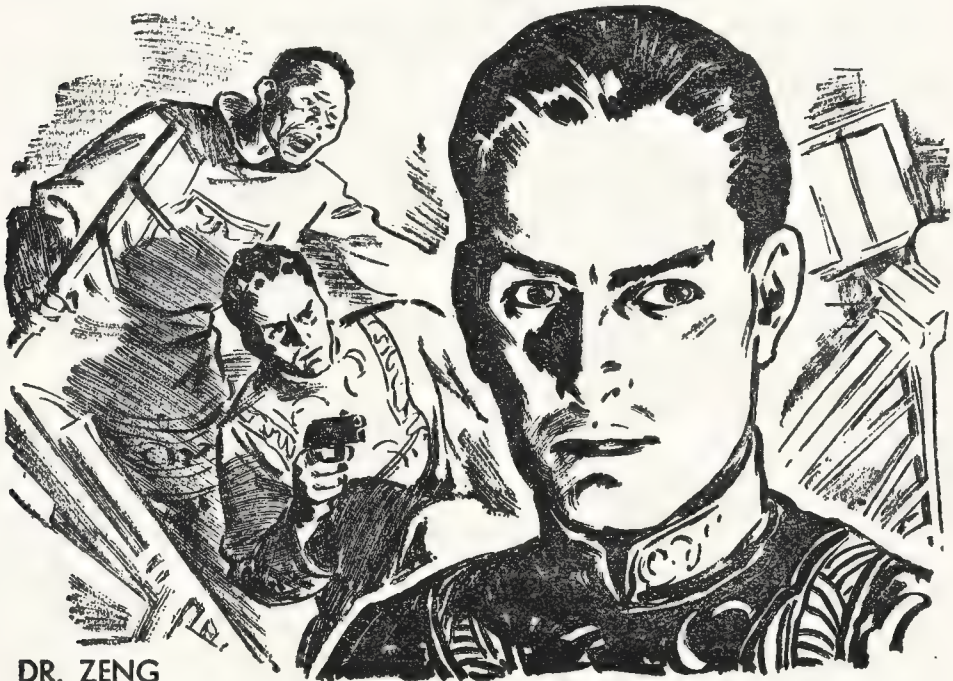
The logic of this left Jimmy Calvin without an answer. But somebody behind him had an explanation ready.

"What you probably saw, young man," a voice quavered, "was the ghost of Pieter Vorbling the First."

For no sane reason, the words tightened Calvin's scalp. He swung around to face the speaker, a gnarled and wrinkled old man whose stooped shoulders were enveloped in a voluminous and ancient opera cape, and whose rheumy eyes held a weird look

"I've handled the affairs of the Vorbling family through two generations," the oldster continued, "and my father before me was the first Pieter Vorbling's attorney. So I ought to know everything there is to be known about this mansion. And I can assure you it is unoccupied—except by the ghost." He turned to a chunky, younger man standing beside him. "Isn't that right, Michael?"

The chunky man turned and grinned mirthlessly.



DR. ZENG

of fanaticism. He himself had the appearance of a wraith from the past—a ghost talking about a ghost!

His parchment lips made deep seams around a smile as he saw Jimmy Calvin's eyes widen.

"It's quite all right, young man. I didn't mean to startle you. I'm Geoffrey Warren, senior partner in the law firm of Warren, Foxxe and O'Harra."

This didn't mean anything to the newspaper photographer, and his expression said so.

"I wouldn't care to be quoted as believing in haunts. But if there is a ghost, I don't envy him. I was in the place a few days ago on a routine checkup—and if ever there was a spooky house, this was it! Certainly there was nothing in it to attract a prowler. It would have been warmer for a tramp to sleep outside than in any of those musty old rooms."

"You made a routine inspection?" Jimmy Calvin asked.

"Yes," the chunky man said. "I am Michael O'Harra. Mr. Warren's

junior law partner." He gestured toward the oldster in the opera cape.

Even as he identified himself the roof of the Vorbbling mansion collapsed in chaotic flames, sending fountains of sparks spewing upward.

"Well, that's the end of it," the battalion chief growled. "If anybody was in there he's dead now."

Puzzled and uneasy, Jimmy Calvin started down the hill toward where he had parked his car well below the fire lines. He was in a hurry to get to his office, and develop his films. Somehow he could not forget that face he thought he had seen at the attic window. Deep in his mind a vague sense of recognition was stirring, as if at some time in the past he had looked upon those bearded features before—or a picture of them.

He wondered if the old attorney, Geoffrey Warren, might be correct in his claim that the apparition had been the ghost of Pieter Vorbbling I. If so, the face would not appear on Calvin's exposed films. He couldn't take pictures of a specter. But if the negatives should reveal that bearded visage, Jimmy Calvin would have irrefutable proof that a living man had been in the doomed residence.

Reaching his car, the *Globe* cameraman shifted his Speed Graphic to his left hand and fumbled for his keys. He was so intent upon opening the locked coupé that he failed to see the two men who furtively trailed him down the Mason Street grade, fixing masks upon their faces as they closed in.

At the last instant, some sixth sense warned Jimmy Calvin and he turned, swinging. He had no chance. A blackjack bludgeoned him across the skull with sickening concussion, drove him to his knees. He tried to support himself on all fours, tried to shove himself upright. Another bruising smash felled him, this time for keeps.

As if from a vast distance away he heard a voice snarling:

"Don't sap him again. Bust the camera and let's get outa here!"

Then a heavy foot crashed down upon Jimmy Calvin's Speed Graphic, reduced it to splinters. Through a surflike beating of pain that throbbed in his ears, the photographer heard his assailants fading off in the fog, leaving him semi-conscious and too stunned to move or call out for help.

CHAPTER II

UNFINISHED BUSINESS



VACANT and dismal house, weather-beaten and scabrous from lack of paint was across the street from the fire-gutted Vorbbling mansion. And as the flames from the doomed structure died down, a shadowy figure

skulked toward this dilapidated and wretched residence. He used a key on a rusty side door lock to let himself in.

With a flashlight he probed the gloom, located a steep staircase leading to the cellar. Scarcely had he descended when a bell jangled shrilly. From a dusty shelf he lifted a telephone; spoke in guarded tones.

"Did you stop him and destroy his cameras?"

Back came a panting voice, as if the speaker had just walked rapidly up a steep hill.

"Cameras? There wasn't but one. We fixed that."

"You stupid fools, he used a minicam for protection shots! I saw him. Go back and finish your job, you blundering idiots!"

From a pay station phone two blocks away, two men presently emerged and pelted back down Mason Street in chastened haste. But when they reached the spot where they had attacked Jimmy Calvin, all they saw was the tail-light of the photog-



A bearded face was staring from the attic window, with an agonized expression

rapher's coupé vanishing around the Sutter Street intersection.

Cursing as they realized their quarry had escaped, they hailed a cab and directed the hacker to take the quickest route to the *Globe* Building, hoping to intercept the cameraman there. But although they speedily reached the newspaper office and lurked in front of its entrance more than an hour, they caught no glimpse of Jimmy Calvin—for he had decided not to return to the place of his employment.

Instead, he had carried his problem to the only man in San Francisco in whom he had implicit confidence.

That man was Dr. Zeng Tse-Lin.

Deep in the heart of Chinatown lay the headquarters of this mysterious individual, in a building set slightly apart from its neighbors. The ground floor was a store, above whose entrance a sign proclaimed:

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DR. ZENG TSE-LIN, *Proprietor*

But Jimmy Calvin was not interested in objects of Asiatic art. He parked his car on Grant Avenue and walked the short, silent block lined on either side by pagoda-style buildings which, by day, teemed with trade. Now they were dark and deserted, as was the Mandarin Emporium itself when Calvin thumbed the bell button.

He wondered if Dr. Zeng had already retired. The speculation was groundless, for Zeng was a man who did with very little sleep.

Upstairs in the living quarters on the second floor, the tall and hawklike Zeng Tse-Lin had been reading an ancient Tibetan scroll. Now he looked up at the sound of the deep-throated door gong, his black eyes rapierlike in their intensity.

He arose, his long, lithe body clad in a rich mandarin robe. Crossing the opulently furnished room, he

opened the lid of a teakwood box resting on an ebony desk.

Inside was a small reflecting device, blank at present. But when Zeng's clever fingers touched a switch, the ground glass screen glowed to life and disclosed a miniature image of Jimmy Calvin down at the front door.

This was just one of Zeng's many inventions, an adaptation of the television principle which enabled him to study his visitors before admitting them. In Chinatown, the home of Dr. Zeng was known as the "House of a Thousand Beatitudes." But to those who had glimpsed some of its inner mysteries it was more like a house of scientific magic.

SEEING Calvin and noting the crumpled condition of the photographer's clothing, the bruise above his left temple, Zeng turned and addressed his giant Mongol servant, Lai Hu Chow.

"Go to the door, O friend of my boyhood and my manhood," he instructed. "You will find a newspaper photographer waiting—one Jimmy Calvin. Conduct him to me."

The huge Chinese servitor blinked at his master with the surprise which always showed on his otherwise impassive and moonlike features when Dr. Zeng identified a visitor in advance of actual appearance. Lai Hu Chow knew that Zeng Tse-Lin possessed powers not given to ordinary men. But how these powers operated was a riddle he did not attempt to fathom. Secretly he had a notion—though he never mentioned it—that Dr. Zeng had occasional bargains with the devil.

Not that it mattered. The giant Chow had never known the meaning of fear. The scars of a hundred battles marked him as a warrior. He had even lost a leg as a result of an encounter with the Japanese bandits who had brought death to Zeng's parents, back in China.

Small wonder, then, that there should be a fast bond of friendship between these two men who had faced countless dangers side by side. Small wonder that Chow would have linked arms with Satan himself, had his master commanded it.

As for Zeng, he trusted the huge Mongol as he trusted few other men. In fact, Chow was one of the few persons who knew the truth of Zeng Tse-Lin's parentage—that he was in reality a white American whose baptismal name was Robert Charles Lang!

Even the doctor's Chinese neighbors supposed him to be of their own race. But while it was true that Zeng had been born in China, his mother and father had been affluent American missionaries who had given their lives to the development of that distant land. They had been murdered in their prime by invading Nipponese during a cowardly attack outside Shanghai.

That foul deed had occurred while Zeng himself had been in the United States, finishing his education. Prior to this, he had absorbed everything that the Chinese could teach him. He had studied in the remote lamaseries of Central Asia and had been admitted to the secret lores no other white man had ever explored.

Then, in America, he had graduated from the best technological universities and medical schools. As a result, he was a great doctor and a master surgeon; a scientist whose knowledge encompassed myriad fields.

To the wealth inherited from his slain parents he had added another fortune from his amazing discoveries and inventions. The scientific books he had written were standard texts in more than one college, and his methods of gymnastic exercise far outstripped anything taught at home or abroad.

Rich beyond avarice, he had the strength of ten men—and the learning of a hundred. He could have been

a leader in any path of life he might have chosen. But because his parents had been killed by criminals he had elected to utilize his vast talents in a never-ending war against crime. This was the grim vengeance he had pledged his murdered father and mother.

The Mandarin Emporium was both a hobby and a shield to conceal his true career. Few realized this. Jimmy Calvin, the man now ringing Zeng's doorbell, however, was among that few. And Calvin was evidently in need of assistance.

THEREFORE Lai Hu Chow bowed to his master's order and went lumbering from the room, his gait awkward and rolling as a result of the artificial leg he wore. Presently he returned with the *Globe* photographer in tow.

Zeng greeted his guest in Oriental fashion by shaking hands with himself. Calvin had no inkling that he was other than what he appeared to be—a Chinese of the mandarin caste, a scholar entitled to wear the coveted green button despite the obvious fact that he was barely thirty.

"You do my poor dwelling a great honor by gracing it with so illustrious a presence." Zeng's voice was sonorous, resonant. "Be seated, that I may offer you a cup of most inferior tea."

Jimmy Calvin, all his life a San Franciscan, was thoroughly familiar with the Chinese habit of self-disparagement. He knew that Zeng's politeness called for an answer in kind, but he was too excited to indulge in formalities. He waved them aside with an apologetic gesture.

"I've got a problem for you, Zeng. It is one that I'd hesitate to present if I hadn't been at Police Headquarters this afternoon and heard you mention the name Vorbling."

No hint of expression registered on Zeng Tse-Lin's ascetic countenance, for he had schooled himself never to display surprise under any circum-

stances. Yet Jimmy Calvin's words touched a sentient chord deep within him. It was like the ringing of a hidden and warning bell.

"Yes," he said. "That name was spoken. Captain Brian Carter of the police and I were discussing the strange disaster which overtook the Vorbling yacht. What is your interest in the matter, my friend?"

Calvin quickly told him about the fire on Nob Hill—and the face he had seen at the attic window. He sketched in his conversation with old Geoffrey Warren and the younger Michael O'Harra, including their insistence that nobody could possibly have been in the doomed mansion.

"Except maybe a ghost, according to Old Man Warren," Calvin finished. "And I don't believe that."

Dr. Zeng smiled slightly. "It is written that the wise man does not know what he believes, but that a fool is always positive. And you are no fool, Jimmy."

"Thanks. I suppose you're trying to tell me I shouldn't be too sure it was a real face I saw. All right. Maybe I dreamed it. Then why did two guys trail me to my car, black-jack me and smash my camera—unless they figured I had a picture of that face?"

"Did you have such a picture?" Zeng asked sharply.

"Yes."

"And it was destroyed?"

"The one in the Speed Graphic was. But I always make a protection shot with a minicam, in case of accident. And they overlooked that!"

"Excellent!" Dr. Zeng breathed. "Come."

He led the way upstairs to his own elaborately equipped photographic laboratory. He blacked out the dark-room except for a single ruby light which gleamed like the eye of a dragon. He took Jimmy Calvin's minicam and unloaded it, prepared the spool of negative for dousing in a developer bath.

AS HE worked, he spoke crisply. "Do you know anything of the Vorbling family history, Jimmy?"

"A little. The first Pieter Vorbling came to California in the gold rush of Forty-nine, didn't he? Struck it rich, I understand."

"There is more to it than that," Zeng replied as he dipped the film in and out of the developing solution. "Vorbling fared as well as most of the early argonauts, but he was not satisfied. Around Eighteen-sixty he turned to hard-rock mining. Employed Chinese labor. He held his coolies in virtual slavery, even to the point of mounting armed guards over them."

"So that's how he founded his fortune!"

"Quite so. Then one of the laborers, an elderly Cantonese, died from a beating Vorbling gave him. Before he passed to his ancestors he called down a curse upon the Vorbling line, even unto the third generation. He predicted that violent death would come to any member of the Vorbling family living under any roof the old man might erect."

Jimmy Calvin felt the short hairs stirring at the nape of his neck.

"So that was the curse. I've always wondered what it might have been. You hear so many garbled versions."

"This one is accurate," Zeng Tse-Lin said quietly, as he worked. "In any event, Pieter Vorbling the First seemed unaffected by the curse. He continued to pile up wealth. But there is one thing we know. Perhaps because he was so busy, so engrossed in other matters, he neither built nor bought a house of his own for years. He was content to raise his family in rented places. Hand me that brown bottle, will you, Jimmy?"

The photographer complied, marveling at the swift sureness of Dr. Zeng's skill as he processed the minicam film.

"Then what happened?" Calvin asked.

"In the early Eighties, the old man joined the trend to Nob Hill and erected, at great expense, the residence which has ever since been known as the Vorbling mansion. But he did not live to enjoy it, for on the first day of his occupancy he fell down



ANN CARTER

the main staircase to his death. Soon there were stories of a ghost haunting those spacious halls."

"The curse was working!"

"Who knows, my friend? Perhaps it was merely coincidence. I doubt that anyone took the legend seriously until Vorbling's son, Pieter Junior, was murdered by a servant who went insane during the stock market collapse of Nineteen-twenty-nine."

"Making two violent deaths," Jimmy Calvin muttered.

"Yes. Will you give me the fixing solution, please? Now we come to the last of the family line, young Pieter Vorbling Third, a Stanford student when his father was murdered. He ordered the house closed, boarded up, and never entered it again.

"Possibly he feared the curse which stemmed down from his grandfather. Or perhaps he merely disliked the

place because it was so old and gloomy."

"It was downright sinister!"

"I agree," Zeng smiled faintly. "It was scarcely the sort of home a gay young fellow like Pieter Vorbling Third would appreciate. He was the playboy type, a harmless spendthrift whom everybody apparently liked. He spent most of his time on his yacht, which, as you know, regrettably blew up three weeks ago off the northern California coast."

Calvin nodded. "I had the assignment to cover it for my paper. It was pretty bad. Everyone was lost—the crew and nearly a dozen guest passengers."

A QUEER glow lighted Dr. Zeng's eyes for an instant.

"Yes, comprising most of young Vorbling's intimates—college fraternity brothers, many of the girls who had made up numerous house parties at Vorbling's mountain lodge, and one or two business associates in that race-track venture the young man promoted a year ago, which failed."

"You'd almost think the Vorbling curse had widened in scope to touch everybody the kid knew intimately," Jimmy Calvin mused.

"A superstitious person might think so, especially in view of still more recent happenings. Two other men belonging to Pieter Vorbling Third's limited circle have died during the past ten days under mysterious circumstances, thus reducing that circle to a bare handful of survivors. I should hate to think that even this handful may be marked for death."

"Good Lord!" the *Globe* cameraman whispered. "What d'you suppose it all means, Zeng?" Then he added a shrewd question. "What happens to the Vorbling millions now?"

"Young Vorbling never married. He was too busy having a gay time. In fact, he'd had so much to drink the night the cruise started that he

had to be carried aboard the yacht. So his fortune goes into a trust fund devoted to various charities."

"Who's to administer it?"

Zeng Tse-Lin lifted the developed film from its bath.

"Old Geoffrey Warren, the Vorbling lawyer."

"Hm-m-m. The guy who tried to tell me I'd seen a face from the spirit world."

"Perhaps his belief was sincere, Jimmy. Behold." Dr. Zeng snapped on a bright light and held up the strip of minicam negative. "What do you see here?"

Jimmy Calvin stared. "It's that attic window—and there's the bearded man! I guess that proves he wasn't a ghost!"

"It is written that vision is relative. To a man, a stone is insignificant, but to an ant it is a mountain."

"Meaning—"

"Meaning that you are looking upon features identical with those of the first Pieter Vorbling, who died sixty years ago by falling down his mansion staircase!"

CHAPTER III

DEATH AT HEADQUARTERS



JIMMY CALVIN'S throat tightened. Now he understood why the bearded face had seemed vaguely familiar to him, back at that fire on Nob Hill. More than once he had seen newspaper pictures of Pieter Vorbling I, re-

produced from old tintypes. Now recognition dawned, full and complete.

"You're right, Zeng!" he choked. "But how could I have made a snapshot of a ghost? It's impossible!"

The tall, hawklike doctor permitted no expression to cross his features, but inwardly he was tense with a potential theory.

"All things have their explanations," he said gravely, "although sometimes the waters of reason are muddled and obscure."

"You mean the face *was* an apparition?"

"I cannot answer you at the moment, my friend. The matter is one that requires further study. For the present, I suggest that you repair to a hotel instead of to your apartment, and maintain a discreet silence concerning what we have seen and discussed."

"Oh, oh! I get it. Ghost or no ghost, you think somebody may take another crack at me."

"As for that," Zeng said, "I merely advise you to be wary. For all those who are touched by the Vorblings seem to die in a mysterious way. Good night, Jimmy. And remember, he who is forewarned wears a protecting armor."

"I'll watch my step," Jimmy Calvin promised as he took his departure.

But with this assurance, Zeng Tse-Lin was not quite satisfied. For his own peace of mind, as well as the safety of his photographer friend, he ordered the giant Lai Hu Chow to follow.

"See that the young man reaches the hotel of his choice unharmed," he bade the big Mongol. "For there is death abroad, and it is written that the night is a time of evil."

When he was at last alone in the House of a Thousand Beatitudes, Dr. Zeng opened a ceramic Buddha and drew forth the telephone it contained. He dialed Police Headquarters and asked for Captain Brian Carter of the Homicide Division.

Presently Carter's rumbling voice answered. "Hello?"

"This is Zeng Tse-Lin. I suggest that you conduct an investigation of the fire which consumed the Vorbling mansion on Nob Hill tonight."

"Investigate? But why, in heaven's name?"

"It has been said that flames de-

stroy, but ashes always remain. I humbly urge that you follow my advice as soon as is feasible, with particular attention to the possibility of arson and the presence of a human corpse."

"Good Lord, man, are you hinting there's been still another murder?"

"I shall explain in the morning at your office, if you will be gracious enough to receive my unworthy visit."

Then, with polite expressions of concern for Carter's health, Zeng rang off. . . .

To the men at Headquarters, the tall, robed figure of Dr. Zeng Tse-Lin was a familiar sight. He was known to be a close friend of Captain Brian Carter, and as such he needed no permission to enter the Homicide official's private sanctum.

But no member of the Department suspected the ascetic, keen-eyed man of being as Caucasian as themselves. Nor did they guess that he was secretly joined with them in the war against crime.

IT WAS early morning as he went through Carter's doorway, and if he was surprised to see lovely, red-haired Ann Carter in her uncle's dingy office he gave no sign, no indication of how the girl's presence always unsettled him.

Brian Carter arose from his desk, cordially. He liked Zeng, and he was wise enough to realize that this strange, impassive man was far more intelligent than himself. Which was a tribute of no mean proportions, for Carter, a compact and muscular Irishman with ruddy complexion, steel-gray hair and frost-blue eyes, was one of the smartest and shrewdest detectives ever to fight his way to a San Francisco police captaincy.

"Glad to see you, Zeng!" he said warmly. "I hope you won't mind Ann being here. I thought she might help."

This was natural enough, Zeng knew. Because Ann Carter had been

a friend of young Pieter Vorbling III at the university. She was one of that group at whom death now seemed to be striking with uncanny regularity.

Zeng smiled at her, and there was a hint of wistfulness in his glowing eyes. The one thing he regretted about his self-imposed Asiatic rôle was that he dared not tell her he was really of her race. For the good of his cause, however, it was better that she should remain in ignorance of his American parentage. Yet often he deplored the barrier which this raised between them.

"It is a pleasure to behold you again," he said gravely, as for an instant their hands touched and her fine eyes came up to meet his. "There are few whose judgment I would trust as far as I trust yours."

"Thank you," she whispered, a hint of color leaping to her cheeks at the genuineness of the compliment.

Those were no empty words Zeng had spoken, she realized. She understood the Chinese and their manners almost as well as Zeng himself, because she had taught at the Chinatown mission ever since her graduation from Stanford. The dwellers there had come to look upon her as a welcome friend. It was this work which had led to her first meeting with Dr. Zeng, and his subsequent friendship for her police-captain uncle.

And now Brian Carter's cordial manner faded to heavy weariness.

"I've been up all night on that Vorbling thing," he said grimly. "For the life of me, Zeng, I don't see how you guessed so exactly what our investigation would find!"

"Then you did find something?"

"Plenty! First, the fire was incendiary—a touch-off. More than that, there was a corpse in the ruins. A man, burned beyond recognition."

"There has been no identification whatever?"

"Not as yet. I've asked old Geof-

frey Warren, the Vorbling attorney, to look at what's left of the body. I don't think he can do us much good, though."

"Perhaps this will help," Zeng Tse-Lin said calmly. Upon Carter's desk he dropped an enlarged print of the film which Jimmy Calvin had snapped with his minicam. Seeing it, Ann Carter uttered a sharp cry of disbelief.

"Why, that's Pieter Vorbling the First, who died in Eighteen-eighty-five! I've seen portraits of him many times! When on earth was this taken?"

"Last night, at the fire."

BOTH Brian Carter and his niece stared at Zeng as if he might be playing some monstrous jest on them. But before either one of them could speak, Carter's phone rang. The Homicide officer lifted the instrument, listened, and hung up. Then he darted a curious glance at Dr. Zeng.

"That was Geoffrey Warren calling from his office, asking me to come right over. He has identified the dead man!"

"Indeed?" Zeng betrayed no emotion. "My car and servant wait outside. I would be honored to transport you in that most miserable conveyance."

Carter smiled shrewdly. "Meaning you'd like to go along."

"If you would not consider it an intrusion."

"On the contrary!" Carter heaved himself from his chair. "I want you to come. You too, Ann."

He held the door for them, and then followed them to the main entrance.

There Zeng paused as he saw a familiar figure standing near his car at the curb, talking to Lai Hu Chow. It was young Jimmy Calvin, and he looked excited.

The photographer turned, recognized Zeng Tse-Lin and ran toward him calling out as he came.

"Zeng! I've been looking for you! Burglars ransacked my apartment last night while I was away from it, and when I phoned my city editor to report it, he said my dark room at the *Globe* had been torn up, and—"

He got no further. A black sedan came roaring up the cable-car tracks. As it passed Police Headquarters there was a sudden barking report, a lance of flame. Jimmy Calvin lurched, threw up both hands and pitched forward on his face as the sedan sped around the nearest corner.

After that, it seemed a dozen things happened at once. First, Zeng catapulted himself at the fallen cameraman and leaned over him for a swift examination. Second, Chow got his motor running and Captain Brian Carter piled in alongside him with drawn gun, while Ann, despite a command to remain behind, hurled herself into the tonneau.

Then, just as the limousine arrowed into motion, Dr. Zeng himself came erect and leaped into the machine with an automatic in his fist as if by magic.

"Speed, Chow, speed!" he said in a taut, deadly voice. "It is our only hope—for there was no license plate on the back of the killers' car!"

Ann intuitively caught the meaning of his words.

"Killers? Then that's why you left that young man lying on the sidewalk! He—He's—"

"Yes," Zeng Tse-Lin's voice was bleak. "Jimmy Calvin was beyond my poor medical skill. A bullet lodged in his heart."

The ensuing five minutes were a nightmare of blinding and reckless motion. Up front, Chow handled the limousine with consummate and fiendish abandon, oblivious to the chances he took at every intersection. He rounded corner after corner on tires that shrieked raw protest, threading back and forth through an area of ten blocks in a vain search for the sedan from which the shot had been fired.

It was no use. The murderers had escaped as completely as if some cavern had engulfed them. And presently Zeng commanded the giant Mongol to slacken his pace.

"Jackals may go into hiding, but it is written that the tiger shall always be known by his fangs," the hawklike doctor said. "Let us now repair to the offices of Geoffrey Warren, where perhaps we may have better luck."

Chow grumbled, but obeyed. Soon thereafter, Carter and his niece, accompanied by Zeng Tse-Lin, entered the law offices of Warren, Foxxe and O'Harra.

CHAPTER IV

RETURN FROM DEATH



LOCATED on the second floor of one of the older buildings on Market Street, the musty-smelling suite of the law firm looked almost as senile and decrepit as old Geoffrey Warren himself. The senior partner seemed curiously

shrunk behind his battered roll-top desk, and his face had a pinched, bluish appearance that told Zeng's experienced eye that here was a victim of some serious chronic ailment of the heart.

The attorney greeted Carter in a quavering voice and acknowledged the Homicide official's introduction of Zeng and Ann. He then cleared his throat nervously.

"I sent for you, Captain, to admit a grievous error I made last night. Whether it would have made any difference had I taken a different attitude is problematical, since the Vorbling mansion was already enveloped in flames. But the truth is that a newspaper man—I forget his name—claimed to have seen a face at one of the upstairs windows. I ridiculed the

idea, as did my partner, Mr. O'Harra. We were so certain the house was empty that we even accused the young man of hallucinations."

Brian Carter made a grim mouth. "It was no hallucination."

"I realize that, now. Because I have identified the charred body which was removed from the ruins. He was my other partner, Roland Foxxe!"

"You're certain?"

"Quite. His watch and two rings removed all doubts. Much as I regret to say it, Foxxe fired the house and killed himself."

"Roland Foxxe killed himself?" Ann Carter burst out. "I can't believe it! I knew him, knew how well he loved life! Why should he do a thing like that? Unless—" Her voice trailed off.

"Unless what, Ann?" her uncle asked.

"Well, he'd been in love with a girl—Lola Martel. She threw him over and became engaged to young Pete Vorbling. Lola was on that yacht cruise. She died with the others. Maybe her death preyed on Roland's mind—"

"The story is less romantic than that, young lady." Warren's tone was thin and tired. "We've gone over Foxxe's accounts, particularly of the Vorbling estate which was in his charge, and we find that he was thousands of dollars short. He was an embezzler. He must have realized, upon the death of young Pieter Vorbling, that his thefts would come to light. So he committed suicide."

"He chose a blamed spectacular method," Captain Carter said sourly. "How much was the shortage?"

"We haven't the exact figures as yet, but the fire insurance on the mansion will unquestionably make it good. He probably realized the insurance would be greater than any sum the property might bring on the open market. So I suppose he reasoned that this extra amount would,

in a sense, recompense the estate for what he had stolen. Therefore, what you have called his spectacular method of suicide was both atonement and restitution."

"All the same," Carter persisted stubbornly, "I'll have to be given definite figures for the record."

"My remaining partner, Mr. O'Harra, is working on that," the old lawyer said, pressing a button on his desk.

At once Michael O'Harra came into the room, a chunky young man whose eyes widened when he saw Brian Carter's niece.

"Why— Ann! This is a pleasant surprise!"

HE TOOK her hand and they spoke to each other for a moment. Then, in response to Geoffrey Warren's prompting, he got down to business.

"I suppose Roland thought the Vorbling estate was so large that a hundred thousand dollars or so wouldn't matter. In a way he was right, for there are millions left. And the theft might have remained hidden if Pieter Vorbling Third hadn't died in that yacht disaster. Naturally that demanded an audit for the probate court, and Roland was faced with exposure. Poor devil, to think he was dying in that house last night and we refused to believe the newspaper photographer!"

For the first time, Zeng spoke. "Did Roland Foxxe sport a beard?"

"Beard?" repeated O'Harra. No, of course not. He was young—about my own age, and as clean-shaven."

"Then it could not have been Foxxe whom the cameraman saw," Dr. Zeng stated impassively.

He produced the enlargement he had previously shown to the Carters. Old Geoffrey Warren affixed his glasses, stared at the print, and went gray about the lips.

"God bless my soul, this is a perfect likeness of the first Pieter Vor-

bling! I remember him well. I was twenty when he died. But how could—"

Zeng had stepped back a pace, watching everyone in the room. And he caught a fleeting expression of fear on the face of Michael O'Harra, a look which was swiftly erased in favor of a palpably forced smile.

"Absurd!" the younger attorney scoffed. "If that's a picture of the first Vorbling, then the photographer must have got hold of an old print and doctored it into this snapshot for the sake of yellow journalism! May I have this enlargement? I'd like to get an expert's opinion."

"I am sorry, but I prefer not to allow the print out of my possession." Dr. Zeng was polite, but adamant. "However, I can assure you there was no trick photography, for I developed the negative myself."

"Maybe there was a double exposure before the film reached your hands. That cameraman ought to be grilled!"

Zeng Tse-Lin shook his head gravely.

"What you suggest is impossible, sir. The young man is dead. He was murdered just a little while ago."

"Dead!" O'Harra whispered. "Then we have to accept the snapshot as genuine—which means maybe there is a ghost. And a Vorbling curse!"

"You seem disturbed, sir," said Dr. Zeng. "May I ask why?"

"You'd be disturbed, too, if you were in my shoes!" O'Harra snapped. "I was one of Pieter Vorbling Third's friends—which begins to seem like another way of saying I'm a member of a death club, a circle of the doomed!"

From his roll-top desk, Geoffrey Warren quavered:

"Don't say such things, Michael. It's bad for my heart."

Even as he spoke, his telephone rang. He answered it, and evidently he heard something even worse for his heart, because his wrinkled face

turned a sickly yellow, and his gnarled knuckles whitened around the receiver.

"Yes . . . yes . . . Oh, my goodness . . . I can't believe it . . . a miracle . . . Yes, I'll be here . . . good-by."

He rang off, and then slumped partially forward in his chair.

INSTINCTIVELY, Dr. Zeng knew that death was close to the old man. He could tell by the purplish lips, the fluttering breath, the dulled and stricken eyes. And the doctor's response was an immediate leap to action. He seized Warren and propped him up right while delving accurate fingers into the ancient attorney's pockets.

In the vest he found what he wanted, a small glass ampule enclosed in a tiny wad of cotton.

"Most heart sufferers carry amyl nitrite for emergency use," he stated, as he crushed the ampule under Warren's nostrils.

The old lawyer gasped as he inhaled the pungent fumes. Color slowly returned to his cheeks.

"Thank you, Doctor," he whispered "You saved my life."

"Yes," Zeng dismissed the incident. "But what is the message which caused you such a nearly fatal shock?"

"The voice of someone I'd thought dead," Geoffrey Warren answered weakly. "That was young Pieter

Vorbling Third on the phone. He's alive, he's in town—and he's coming here to see me!"

The effect was electrifying. An astounded exclamation burst from Michael O'Harra's lips.

"Pete Vorbling—alive? But how can that be possible?"

"He said he owed it all to a surgeon named Hertzig, and that he would explain in person," Warren rejoined in the tone of one who had undergone almost more than a sick man's endurance could stand. "Beyond that, I know nothing. I must wait until he comes here from his hotel before I learn how he escaped the yacht disaster."

Zeng Tse-Lin shook his head. "If you will pardon my unworthy intrusion, sir, as a physician I advise you to put no additional strain upon your heart today. Postpone your meeting with young Mr. Vorbling until tomorrow. For the present, go home and rest."

"But he expects to find me here!"

"Give me the name of his hotel. I shall call him and inform him of your condition. Surely he will understand."

"Well, perhaps you're right. I am worn out. He's at the Sir Francis. Now if you will get a cab for me—"

"I am sure Mr. O'Harra will be glad to drive you home." Dr. Zeng's dark eyes turned to the younger partner. "Am I presuming too much, sir?"

[Turn page]

NO FINER DRINK. . . under the sun or moon



Michael O'Harra seemed only too anxious to be of service. He helped Warren into his voluminous opera cape, supported the old lawyer, and guided his faltering steps to the open door.

When the two men had gone, Zeng spoke rapidly to Brian Carter.

"Take Ann home at once, my friends. And see that she remains there until I contact you at Headquarters, later."

"You've got something up your sleeve, Zeng. What is it?"

"It has been written that the workings of a man's mind sometimes are best clothed in silence. You will forgive me, I hope, if I withhold my answer temporarily."

Carter shrugged in resignation, for he knew it would be useless to attempt to delve into the motives of this strange, enigmatic man.

"Just as you say," he sighed. "Come along, Ann."

The girl gave Zeng a worried smile, then followed her uncle from the office. Zeng immediately lifted the telephone and dialed the Sir Francis. When he got his party he spoke incisively. He then cradled the phone, cast a piercing glance around the room, and departed as quietly as a shadow.

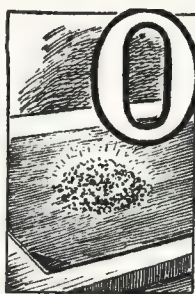
Downstairs, though, a slight hint of impatience crossed his ascetic countenance when he saw his limousine at the curb but no Lai Hu Chow at the wheel.

The giant Mongol had a single failing—the love of lurid Western movies. Frequently at the most inopportune times he would slip away to some cheap theater, perhaps to see a picture he had seen a dozen times before. It was a habit which no amount of argument could break. And now, apparently, he had succumbed to it once more for he was nowhere in sight.

Well, there was no help for it, Zeng concluded. He slid behind the wheel and headed for Chinatown.

CHAPTER V

VISITORS



ONLY an hour later Dr. Zeng personally admitted a visitor to the House of a Thousand Beatitudes, conducting him upstairs to the luxurious Oriental living room.

"Please forgive my lack of a servitor, Mr. Vorbling," he apolo-

gized. "I employ one, but he is sometimes erratic."

"That's okay," the visitor said casually.

He was almost as tall as Zeng himself, and his clothing was impeccably tailored. His face, however, was partially covered with bandages held by adhesive tape, so that only the good-humored mouth and quizzical eyes were revealed.

"I'm curious to know why you phoned me at the hotel and asked me to come here," he observed.

"All in due course, my friend. First, permit me to congratulate you on your miraculous escape from death."

"Miraculous? Well, maybe. Although they say heaven or the devil takes care of drinkers and fools—and I certainly had been having plenty to drink the night my yacht blew up. All I remember of the explosion was an ear-splitting roar. Then I woke up swimming in the water. The sea was running pretty high, and I took quite a beating from the rocks. I had hamburger where my face should have been."

"And?"

"Then came the miracle part. I was washed ashore practically in the front yard of a retired plastic surgeon, a screwy old character named Hertzig. Sort of a recluse; a hermit, you might call him. No chance of my phoning or wiring anybody from that remote spot, of course.

"I couldn't have, anyhow. I was too bashed up."

"But this Hertzig attended your injuries?"

"Like a master. He hemstitched me until I'll look as good as new—or so he assured me. There'll be some scars, of course. I won't mind them, though. I wasn't too handsome, anyhow." He tacked that latter observation on ruefully.

"It has been said that a handsome man breeds enemies, but a man whose heart is true never lacks friends."

"Friends!" The word was repeated with a tinge of bitterness. "I wish I'd never had any! Look what's happened to almost everybody I cared for. First, ten of them got killed when my yacht exploded—including Lola Martel, the girl I was going to marry. Now I understand two more have died under queer circumstances during the past week or so. And last night Roland Foxxe!"

Zeng made a steeple of his long fingers.

"Would you term Roland Foxxe a friend, after he had embezzled your money?"

"Embezzled? What do you mean?"

"I take it, then, that you have not heard. Well, no matter. I am sure you will be furnished the details by your attorneys, Geoffrey Warren and Michael O'Harra. Which brings me to the actual reason I asked you to visit my miserable establishment. I should like to ask you this: Do you trust those two men?"

"Implicitly!"

"You would suspect neither of them of wrongdoing? Of theft, and perhaps even multiple murder?"

"What rot! Of course I wouldn't suspect them of any such nonsense!"

"Let us hope that your trust is not misplaced, Mr. Vorbling. And now, just one more thing. Can you identify this photo which I mentioned on the phone?"

Zeng produced the enlargement of Jimmy Calvin's snapshot.



CAPT. BRIAN CARTER

"Let's see it. Blast these bandages! They get in my way! But I guess I ought to be thankful I'm not dead along with the others . . . Hey, where in thunder did you get this picture? I'd swear it's my grandfather if I didn't know better!"

ZENG TSE-LIN succinctly explained how the snap had been taken.

"Would you say it might be Roland Foxxe wearing make-up?" he asked then.

"Hmm. I don't know. It's possible, of course. But what a nutty thing for him to do when he was killing himself!"

"Perhaps you have spoken more wisely than you know, Mr. Vorbling. There seems to be an insane pattern about many events of the past two weeks, a crazy and deadly rhythm. If you would accept my humble advice, you will do well to guard yourself each moment until the sleeve of mystery is unraveled."

"Thanks, I'll remember that . . . I say, *what's that?*"

His exclamation was caused by a sudden rattlesnake buzzing which seemed to emanate from everywhere and nowhere. It was a continuing sound, subdued yet inescapable. The whole house seemed full of it.

As if by some trick of legerdemain there was an automatic in Zeng's hand, suddenly.

"An intruder," he said softly. "Down at my front door. The sound you hear is an alarm of my own contriving, set into operation when the lock is tried by any other key than mine or my servant's, which are of a special electromolecular alloy. Let us look."

As he spoke, Zeng touched a concealed button on the wall. A section of tapestry rustled aside, disclosing what resembled a medium-sized movie screen. This was still another television adaptation, similar to the smaller one he employed to identify visitors at his front door.

In the present case, however, the screen was connected to a battery of electric scanning eyes that were set into the facade of a building opposite the Mandarin Emporium. Zeng secretly owned that building.

By virtue of the installation, the screen on Zeng's living room wall revealed the entire front of the House of a Thousand Beatitudes, as well as a limited section of the block itself, as if seen from across the street. And in the broad light of noon, two men were revealed using a skeleton key on the lock of Zeng's front door. Only their backs could be seen, since they were facing that door as they worked.

And now, as in a motion picture, swift action began. Into the field of vision came a new and giant shape. That was Lai Hu Chow, lumbering along with awkward gait.

Chow spotted the two men just as they succeeded in opening his master's portal. With a speed belied by his ungainliness, he sprang toward

the intruders. From the capacious sleeve of his cotton jacket, a glittering hatchet suddenly appeared. The giant Mongol was essentially a man of direct action. His belief was that if a man had an enemy the only thing to do was liquidate him as fast as possible. This was why he enjoyed the Western movies he attended at every chance, and from which he was even now returning.

But as he sprang, his vengeful outcry warned the two intruders. They whirled, and one of them drew a silenced automatic. A blurt of flame spewed from the bulbous excrescence on the muzzle of the weapon. Chow stumbled and went down, his head striking on the curbstone. He lay still.

The two men darted inside the House of a Thousand Beatitudes, leaving their victim sprawled on the sidewalk.

Dr. Zeng's lips compressed, went white.

"Seek cover, Mr. Vorbling," he commanded his bandaged visitor. "I go to greet my uninvited guests."

"Oh, no! I'm joining the party. Something tells me I may be useful."

"Your spirit is commendable, sir, but a welcome has already been arranged for any who dare enter my dwelling unbidden." Zeng opened the door giving access to the staircase. "Halt, O spawn of many vile camels!"

THE two men were leaping up the steps, and at Zeng's command they stiffened. The one with the silenced automatic triggered a slanting shot upward.

The slug missed Zeng Tse-Lin but he heard a winching gasp of pain behind him.

"Mr. Vorbling—you have been hit!" he called.

Then Zeng's foot touched a concealed control in the corridor wainscoting. A startling result ensued. Part of the staircase dropped out of sight like the orifice of a chute. The

two oncoming men went plummeting into this yawning aperture, which swallowed them at one gulp.

Then, magically, the staircase became normal again. Dr. Zeng turned.

"How severe is your wound, Mr. Vorbling?"

"It's nothing. Just a sting across the forearm. Didn't even draw blood."

"Then forgive me if I sound inhospitable, but you must take your departure at once. I have work to do."

Zeng ushered him to the front door, then left him and sped toward Lai Hu Chow.

The entire action had consumed less than a minute, from the time of Chow's fall until the present. And since the bullet that had felled him had been noiseless, no crowd had yet gathered.

However, two or three neighboring merchants began to pad-pad across the street to determine what was wrong with the huge Mongol. Chow was now staggering upright with an infuriated look on his moonlike countenance and a bruise upon his forehead where it had violently contacted the curbstone.

Zeng waved these neighbors away.

"Chow, my brother!" he said as he reached his huge servitor and friend. "Where did the bullet strike?"

The Mongol, whose grammar was as good as any man's when he was not excited, lapsed into irate pidgin English, preceded by a few unmistakable Western "cuss words."

"Slug hittee me in game leg, knockee me down, makee me conk headee on pavement!" he yammered. "Me gettee plenty even with slomebody, you betcha!"

Zeng breathed a sigh of relief and swung about.

"You will observe, Mr. Vorbling, that no harm has been done. Therefore I beseech you to return to your hotel and guard against any eventual-ity."

"You mean those two thugs may have been gunning for *me*? You think maybe they followed me here to knock me off?"

"In an insecure world, all things are possible."

"But what about those guys? What happened to them? Shouldn't they be turned over to the cops?"

"It shall be done when I have questioned them. At present I have them safely caged and harmless. I bid you good day, Mr. Vorbling."

When his bandaged guest had driven off, Zeng took Chow's arm. Together they entered the House of a Thousand Beatitudes, where every limping step the Mongol took left a wet stain upon the rich carpeting.

Upstairs, the giant squatted on the floor and removed his bullet-punctured artificial limb. From its hollow interior he ruefully drew the wreckage of a flat glass flask.

"Nuts!" he mourned. "Me forkee out six bits for pint of rice wine and it all leakee before Chow takee one dlink!"

Zeng Tse-Lin's lips curved in an affectionate smile.

"It is written that wine is best for a man when it is spilled upon the ground," he admonished. "Equip yourself with one of your many spare limbs, my incorrigible one. This time see that it contains a gun, not a bottle. Then we shall interview the unwise pair who forced their way into my house."

CHOW obeyed, and presently they entered a concealed private elevator which lowered them to basement level. Here Zeng made a light, waved the Mongol back, and unlocked the door of what appeared to be a dungeon cell.

He stepped across the threshold and surveyed the two gunmen who had been dumped through the staircase trap-door. One of them drew his silenced pistol, but Zeng was too quick for him. There was a flurry of

motion, then Zeng had the weapon and a disarmed thug moaned over a sprained wrist. It did not pay to match either physical or mental strength with Dr. Zeng!

With equal sureness he ascertained that the second evil-doer was gunless. Then he smiled bleakly.

"Your faces are brutish and unintelligent," he addressed them. "But even dolts as stupid as yourselves must realize when you have met your master. Now, will you answer my questions truthfully?"

"We ain't talkin'!"

"You may change your minds. There is but one thing I wish to know. That is the name of the man you work for."

"Try an' find out!"

"That should be comparatively easy," Zeng said. Raising his voice, he called Chow into the barren little room. "These, O my stalwart one, are the unfortunate ones who fired that shot at you. Would you like revenge?"

Chow licked his lips. "How far you lettee me go?"

"Well, they seem reluctant to talk. You might, therefore, remove the silent tongues which they find so useless."

"Hot doggee! The tongues, hanh? Jerkee out by roots!" The big Monggol moved forward, fingers twitching. The nearer thug paled and backed off.

"You're kiddin'!"

"Chow does not know the meaning of the word," Zeng answered. "He only knows obedience to my commands."

Even as he spoke, the giant Asiatic grabbed both gunmen in a grip of steel. They broke into babbling protest.

"Hey—nix! Criminee, the guy means it! We'll spill! Make him turn us loose!"

"Speak, and be quick about it!" Dr. Zeng's tone was resonant, ominous. "You are trying my patience."

CHAPTER VI

DEAD MAN'S NUMBER



VOLUBLE with terror, the two thugs gushed information—such as it was. They had been hired a week before by a man whose face they had never seen. He had accosted them in midnight darkness, down near a certain Embarcadero saloon which was their hangout, and he had worn a mask even then.

Subsequently they had driven him on various missions around town whose purpose they could only guess when they saw the next day's newspapers. Those papers had reported murders at the addresses visited.

Then this mysterious masked individual had stationed them on guard outside the old Vorbling mansion on Nob Hill, twenty-four hours a day for a solid week. No reason had been given to them, but last night during the fire they had been instructed to waylay a photographer and smash his cameras.

They had obeyed, only to be told that their victim had a second camera which must be destroyed. In this mission they had failed.

"You were then told to burglarize the *Globe* dark room and the photographer's apartment," Zeng interposed. "But again you failed to locate that second camera. Whereupon your masked employer had you drive him in search of the cameraman this morning. You caught up with your victim in front of police headquarters and shot him down in cold blood."

"Nix, nix! We didn't do no triggerin'! It was the guy in the mask!"

"But you are equally guilty, for you realized by that time that you were working for a murderer. Yet you continued to work for him. You allowed him to send you here to my house, armed. I know the purpose of

your visit, so we need not discuss that. It is your employer I seek."

"We don't know nothin' about him, I tell you!"

"How did you contact him when it became necessary?"

The bigger thug narrowed his eyes.

"What's it worth to you?" he whined. "Do we get a chance to lam?"

"Ah! So you think to bargain with Zeng Tse-Lin! There is but one bargain I shall make with you, O son of a turtle. Let your tongue wag within your mouth, or I promise you it will wag upon the palm of Lai Hu Chow!"

The big Mongol flexed his fingers. "Blame toottee!"

"Hey, keep him offa us! Here's the dope you want! It's a phone number—Ballard nine-four-four-three. We was to call it any time anything came up. But it won't do you no good. It's unlisted. We checked on that."

Zeng's eyes glowed. "There are many ways of checking," he intoned somberly.

Then he gestured Chow from the underground room, followed, and locked the door on his prisoners.

Upstairs, he dialed Police Headquarters and got Brian Carter on the line.

"I have tidings," he said, and he told of his captives and the information he had extorted from them.

Carter's response held elation. "Good! Now maybe we'll get somewhere. I'll get busy on that phone number right away. Meanwhile I'll send a squad over to take those rats off your hands. See you soon."

He was as good as his word. Within fifteen minutes police had taken the two hoods from the House of a Thousand Beatitudes. And presently Brian Carter himself arrived. There was no elation in his manner, though.

"I'm afraid we drew a blank," he told Dr. Zeng. "That number on the Ballard exchange is worthless."

"You mean it is listed under a fictitious name?"

"Worse than that," the Homicide official growled. "It's listed to a dead man. The installation is in a hide-away apartment secretly maintained by the late Roland Foxxe!"

ZENG and Carter looked at each other in heavy silence. Then the police official sank wearily into a chair.

"The whole thing's got me screwy," he said. "I've seen some strange cases in my time, but none like this one! For no reason, a costly yacht blows up and kills a whole group of people. Soon, two more persons die mysteriously here in town—both of them belonging to that same general circle. Then a ghost gets its picture taken, and the photographer is killed."

"An embezzler traps himself deliberately in a burning building and goes to spectacular death. Finally Pieter Vorbling the Third returns from the grave, you might say, only to be shot at right here in your house! By heavens, Zeng, I'm beginning to believe there is a curse on the Vorbling family!"

Zeng Tse-Lin bowed his head. "It is written that the ways of Providence are not for the understanding of common mortals. Consider this surgeon, Hertzig, in whose front yard young Vorbling was washed up by the sea."

"What about him?"

"In him, and his being on that particular spot along the coast, you see the workings of the Providence I speak of."

"Call it Providence if you want to. Coincidence seems more like it, to me. I looked up his record, found out he used to be tops in his profession until he got into some trouble with the medical association a year or so ago. Then he gave up his practice, withdrew up north, built himself a shack and cut himself off from the world. He certainly couldn't have known he was to have a wrecked yacht on his doorstep a year later. That was just

luck. Good luck for Pieter Vorbling the Third."

"But what sort of luck for Hertzig, I wonder?" Zeng mused.

"An excellent break for him! Young Vorbling will pay him a fat fee for his services, not to mention the publicity he'll get in the newspapers. The story of Vorbling's rescue has made headlines already, in the early afternoon editions. And several reporters have flown north to interview Hertzig personally. Maybe he'll even go back into practice again."

"I wonder," Dr. Zeng said softly.

Carter peered at him narrowly. "Something's hatching under that black hair of yours, Zeng. What is it?"

The tall, hawk-faced man sighed. "Sometimes, my friend, an idea may be so nebulous that it should not be disclosed until it has been proved. I should very much like to talk to this Hertzig surgeon. Would you honor my miserable limousine by making the journey with me? It is but a four-hour drive, and we should gain our destination by nightfall."

Captain Brian Carter stopped the questions which came to his lips. He knew, from Zeng's expression, that such queries would be fruitless. He sighed and got up from the easy chair.

"I'll go along. Maybe the air will do me good."

Fifteen minutes later, with Chow at the wheel, they were speeding northward toward the Golden Gate Bridge. . . .

THE house which Dr. Josef Hertzig had erected for himself was little more than a ramshackle cabin perched high on a promontory above the rolling surf. The coast was desolate and rugged in the gray dusk as Chow, following instructions he had elicited from a service station miles back, swung off the main highway into what could be termed a side road only by the greatest courtesy.

This deep-rutted pathway skirted the cliff within a few precarious feet of the brink, and there were recent tire marks impressed upon the barren earth. Far below was a ribbon of flat beach, the sand gouged as if by wheels and tail skids where more than one plane had landed. Beyond this beach were clusters of jagged rocks worn sharp by pounding waves.

Brian Carter stared down through a tonneau window of the limousine.

"Br-r-r!" he commented. "Young Vorbling had the devil's own luck to get blown clear of the yacht and then live through those boulders. It's a wonder . . . Hey, look! There's a car coming toward us from the shack!"

Up front, Chow increased his speed to gain a turn-out point before meeting the oncoming car where it could not pass. Reaching the wider spot, he swerved expertly. But the other machine, instead of going on by, stopped. An excited, middle-aged man hopped out.

Captain Carter recognized him.

"Aren't you Lew Blake on the *Oakland Ledger*?" he asked.

"Yes. I . . . Why, hello, Captain! Man, am I glad to see you! I thought maybe this car would be from some other paper and spoil my scoop. But I know you'll give me a break and let me beat the opposition. I—"

"Stop chattering. What's up?"

"Well, when I tried to charter a plane down in San Francisco to fly me up here so I could interview this Hertzig, the boys from the other dailies had already hired all the available ships. So I had to drive up in my car. That put me a good three hours behind my competition. Everybody had been here and flown away by the time I arrived. I could tell by the signs. But man, what a story it gives me now!"

Carter scowled. "What story?"

The reporter swung to the limousine's running board.

"Drive on ahead. I'll show you."

Chow meshed his gears, sent the

car forward, and presently parked it in front of the cabin on the cliff. Then Zeng Tse-Lin and Carter followed the *Ledger* man to the front door of the little building. It was wide open, swinging in the wind.

"See for yourselves." The reporter pointed.

Zeng's piercing eyes penetrated the interior gloom and came to rest upon a stocky, huddled form on the uncarpeted floor. It was Dr. Josef Hertzig. There was a stab wound through his heart. He was dead.

CHAPTER VII

CALL TO THE DEAD



IT WAS eight o'clock at night when Lai Hu Chow finally headed the limousine southward toward San Francisco. During the preceding hours, Brian Carter had been a busy man. He had contacted the local county authorities, notified them of the murder, and then had stood guard pending arrival of the sheriff's men.

As a visiting Homicide expert he had done his best to assist in the preliminary investigation. That had been a task in which Zeng, oddly enough, had offered no hand after his first cursory inspection of the scene of the crime.

Now it was over, and they were speeding homeward down the dark highway. After a few miles, Carter broke the long silence.

"I can't understand it," he muttered. "Hertzig was alive when the last reporters left him and flew back to San Francisco. We know that, because a telephone check has been made by the sheriff. Yet the surgeon was dead when that *Ledger* man arrived by auto."

Zeng emerged from his own enigmatic thoughts.

"I hinted to you, my friend, that Hertzig might never resume his practice."

"You mean you had a hunch he might be killed?"

"The Vorbling touch was upon him, remember."

"Then you *did* suspect he was in danger! That was why you insisted on making this trip. You hoped to warn him!"

"I hoped also to talk with him before it was too late. But I failed, for I neglected to consider the swiftness of airplane travel." Dr. Zeng paused, then added casually: "Do you happen to know if young Pieter Vorbling the Third can pilot a plane?"

"Vorbling? Surely you don't suspect him! Or if you do, I may as well disillusion you. He can't fly a lick."

"You are quite sure?"

"Positive! I remember Ann telling me last year that Vorbling tried to enlist in the Air Service but couldn't make it, even after taking private lessons. Something about balance; some trouble with his middle ear. He couldn't even ride in a passenger airliner without getting deathly sick. And it's a cinch he wouldn't be fool enough to hire a pilot to bring him up here to commit a murder. The pilot would be a witness against him."

"Which clears Vorbling completely."

"You bet it does! Now if you had asked me about that Michael O'Harra fellow—"

Zeng stiffened. "He is a flyer?"

"Yes. Private license and everything. He and Roland Foxxe invested in a plane together—used to go up every week end. He had Ann on many a sightseeing flight. If the killing of Hertzig originated in San Francisco, then Michael O'Harra is the man to think about! And I'm thinking about him—hard."

"Your theory possesses plausibility, at least," Zeng said.

Carter turned toward him.

"What the devil do you know about my theory?"

"It is easy to follow your reasoning. Young O'Harra was also a member of the law firm which managed the Vorbling estate. It is perfectly possible that he, and not Roland Foxxe, embezzled the missing funds. In which case he would have had an excellent motive for murdering Foxxe by trapping him in the mansion and setting it afire. Then Foxxe would appear as a thief who had atoned by committing suicide."

Carter grunted. "You're a clever devil, Zeng. That's my theory exactly! Except that O'Harra might have had an added reason for doing those things. Remember, the estate was to go to charity and the firm would have its management. Old Geoffrey Warren is old and ill, ready for retirement. With Foxxe out of the way, Michael O'Harra would be sole active partner, in control of several million dollars. Many murders are done for less."

"True," Zeng Tse-Lin admitted. "But you are overlooking one factor. The man who died in that fire wore a beard, yet Roland Foxxe was clean-shaven."

"A disguise—perhaps forced on him by O'Harra. It's a thin explanation, but the only one that fits the facts."

"And now young Pieter Vorbling's return from death throws a fresh complication into the case."

CAPTAIN CARTER shrugged impatiently.

"O'Harra couldn't foresee that when he planted a time bomb on Vorbling's yacht."

"Ah. So you even suspect him of that."

"Why not? It would be part of his pattern for covering his embezzlements and gaining control of the estate. There could be a revenge motivation, too. O'Harra, along with Foxxe, had invested in the race-track

which young Vorbling promoted. That venture collapsed, you'll recall. Seeing his personal savings wiped out may have caused O'Harra to hate young Vorbling even to the point of murder mania."

"But Vorbling escaped."

"Sure. And that ruined the plans O'Harra had made. Which would account for his hiring a pair of gunsels to kill the kid at your house—another scheme that misfired."

"Now explain the death of Dr. Hertzig," Zeng invited.

"Well, mightn't O'Harra be so infuriated at the saving of Vorbling's life that he would fly up here and murder the surgeon responsible?"

"You could carry it even a step further," Zeng said amiably. "O'Harra might be preparing to deny Vorbling's identity. For after those bandages are removed the young man's appearance may be somewhat altered. In which case, O'Harra might wish to liquidate the unfortunate Hertzig as an identifying witness."

"By heavens, I hadn't thought of that!"

"Then consider it well, my friend, and you will discover it to be completely implausible, along with everything else we have discussed. Logic denies the entire structure of your theory from foundation to conclusion."

"Blast it, Zeng, you mean you've been stringing me along?"

"I would prefer to term it a destruction of all the improbabilities. Which clears the way toward the only possible truth." And the tall, hawk-like man fell silent.

It was close to midnight when the limousine finally crossed the Golden Gate Bridge and turned toward the city. Presently it drew up before the darkened Mandarin Emporium. Brian Carter, who had been dozing, awakened with a start.

"Well, here we are," he said grimly. "And in spite of what you've said, my next move will be to give Michael'

O'Harra a sample of the third degree."

Zeng's answer was sharp, staccato.

"Your next move is to duck—quickly!"

Even as he spoke, he catapulted from the car with a rapier's speed.

Long ago he had realized the advantage of unerring night vision. To aid senses which were already abnormally acute he had included in his daily diet a plentiful supply of the A vitamins that promote sight. As a result of this, he had now discerned a figure lurking in the shadows near his



doorway, a man so cloaked in darkness that he might have gone undiscovered by ordinary eyes.

Simultaneously with Zeng's leap from the limousine, the man took a step forward. He hurled a small object at the vehicle.

Zeng Tse-Lin sprang with amazing agility, caught the missile.

"A tear gas bomb!" he whispered.

Then, with a mighty sweeping motion of his arm, he flung the thing far into the night. It landed upon the roof of a three-story building halfway down the block and burst there harmlessly, its fumes dissipating.

THEN Zeng erupted at his assailant before the fellow had an opportunity to turn and run. The ensuing struggle was brief, bewildering, a blurred churning of black shadows. It ended with a significant moan of agony—and Dr. Zeng returned to his companions, dragging with him the inert form of his quarry.

"My back!" the man whimpered.

"You busted it . . . I can't walk!"

"I merely applied pressure to certain spinal nerves, causing temporary paralysis," Zeng retorted with no emotion. "You will walk again, but it will be behind prison walls! Now speak up, and be swift about it. What was your purpose here?"

"I—I was to knock you out with the gas, swipe your keys—get inside your joint and—"

"And steal a certain snapshot negative?"

"Yeah, yeah! How—did you know?"

"Never mind that. Tell me for whom you were working."

"I—dunno. It was a guy—"

"Whose face was masked," Zeng supplied. "A man who gave you a certain telephone number to call in case of emergency. Is that correct?"

"Yeah. Heck! You must be wise to—the whole works!"

"Perhaps I am," Dr. Zeng answered bleakly.

He turned his prisoner over to Carter.

"Since you left your own car parked here at the curb when we journeyed north, Captain," he said, "I suggest that you now transport this unspeakable one to jail."

"You bet I will. I'll sweat him, too, the same as I intend to sweat O'Harra—the man who hired him, whether you believe that or not."

Zeng bowed his ascetic head. "May success be yours, honored friend." And he watched the Homicide officer drive off with the partially paralyzed thug.

As Chow unlocked the door of the House of a Thousand Beatitudes for his master, the giant Mongol asked:

"What you do now to clear up mystery? You have scheme?"

Zeng Tse-Lin ascended the staircase, opened the ceramic Buddha and withdrew its concealed telephone.

"Yes, Chow, I have a scheme. Let us see if we can put through a call to the dead."

CHAPTER VIII

MURDER UNMASKED



WHILE Chow watched, Dr. Zeng dialed Ballard 9443, the number which he had forced from the two gunmen who had attempted to raid his home twelve hours ago.

From the moment of that noontime fracas to the present midnight hour, many things had transpired. It seemed almost as if a year's action had been crowded into a condensation of time. An ordinary man might have been weary by now. But Dr. Zeng was no ordinary man. His splendid muscles sang with health and his perceptions were scalpel-sharp.

He listened to the repeated sound of the ringing signal, betraying no emotion when it seemed there would be no answer. Infinitely patient, he persisted in his efforts—and at last he was rewarded.

"That you, Jake?" a muffled, querulous voice drifted over the wire. "Did you pull it off? Did you get the picture?"

"If Jake is the man you engaged to put me out of action with a gas bomb," Zeng said almost casually, "then I can report that he failed and is now in a cell. This is Dr. Zeng Tse-Lin."

A startled gasp came to Zeng's ear. Then the muffled voice settled back to its quavering monotone.

"Ah! I might have known you would be too much for a fool like Jake, Doctor. And did you pry this number from him, or from those other two numbskulls I sent to your house earlier? Not that it matters. Perhaps you've already traced the connection and learned that it belonged to a dead man, Roland Foxxe."

"You are bold to admit that much, O my enemy," Zeng said.

"Why shouldn't I admit it? The information won't do you any good. Even if you should raid the apartment where the phone is officially connected, you would find nothing. I'll tell you why. I've got the line tapped, and I'm speaking from another instrument in a far different place. A secret extension, you might call it. And unknown to the phone company, of course."

"Very clever indeed," Zeng Tse-Lin admitted. "But your cleverness rapidly approaches its end."

"Don't be too sure of that, you educated Chinese. I happen to hold higher cards than you know. Now, you listen to me. There's a photograph I want, along with the negative. And it's to be understood there will be no holding back of even a single copy. I expect you to turn it over to me."

"And what leads you to this astonishing belief that I might comply?"

The quavering voice chuckled. "My trump cards, Geoffrey Warren and Ann Carter! I have them both here with me. I'll let you listen to the girl so you'll know I'm not fooling."

At once, Ann could be heard on the line.

"Zeng, it's true! I was kidnaped from my apartment and brought here to some cellar near—" Her words were cut off, as if a palm had been clapped to her lips.

For the first time since he had been drawn into this web of mystery, Dr. Zeng's composure vanished. A wild expression of alarm crossed his countenance, to be replaced by one of sheer savagery. His dark eyes flared with hunger to rend and destroy.

He fought himself back to a semblance of calmness, listened as the voice came back on the wire.

"You see, Doctor? Warren easily responded to my lure, and Miss Carter presented no problem. I simply abducted her. Now the game is mine—and I demand that snapshot. Refuse, and my captives die."

"It is written that the wise man recognizes defeat when it is inevitable," Zeng said somberly. "You shall have the picture and the film. Where must I make delivery?"

"I accept, sir. I cannot do otherwise."

THE line went dead. Zeng waited an instant, then began dialing a number. While doing this he briefly told Chow of the ultimatum he had received.

The huge Mongol clenched his fists.

"Must work fast!" he exclaimed.

"Now you call Captain Carter, eh? Fix for him to follow when car drives you to place of evil one."

"No. For Carter, like yourself, is a believer in direct action. He would wish to raid the killer's lair. And should he succeed, I fear it would spell death to Ann. She would be slain at the first sign of a police attack."

"Then how you save her, O my master?"

"By locating the place where she is held and by going there alone, before our enemy sends his car for me."

"Is good scheme if you find evil one's nest. Surprise assault is mighty weapon. But you do not go alone. Lai Hu Chow will not be left behind!"

Zeng's smile held grateful affection. "Would I go forth into battle without my right arm, O mighty one? But hush, while I inquire about the venerable Geoffrey Warren."

With his last words, there came a response to his dialing. The number he had called was that of the residential apartment hotel where the old attorney lived. He spoke to the desk clerk.

"Can you connect me with Mr. Warren?"

"Sorry, sir. He went out about two hours ago. A phone message got him out of bed and he left in quite a hurry."

"Ah, I see. But tell me something.

Since he drives no car of his own, did he take a taxi or did a black sedan come for him?"

"He left in a cab, sir. I called it for him myself."

Zeng Tse-Lin's eyes lighted. "What company, Yellow or Checker?"

"Yellow, from the hack stand just outside."

"Listen closely, my friend. This is very important, a matter of life and death. Will you see if that same driver is back at his stand now?"

Zeng's voice carried even more urgency than the words themselves. The clerk seemed to catch this imperative contagion, for he did Zeng's bidding with no further question. Presently another voice sounded.

"Yeah, this is the driver that rode Mr. Warren. I get his business lotsa times."

"Can you tell me where you took him tonight?"

"Sure. I remember on account I thought it was such a funny place to let him out. The joint looked like nobody hadn't lived in it for years. Up on Nob Hill, it was. A spooky old rat-trap across the street from the house that burned down last night—you know, the Vorbling mansion. So I says to the old gent did he want I should wait for him, and he says no, on account he didn't know how long he was gonna be."

"Thank you, my friend," Zeng cut across this torrent of information. "You have perhaps done a great service for more persons than you think!" And he hung up, turned to Chow. "Come, O my brother. We must make haste."

The command was a welcome one to the big Mongol. With his master at his heels, he clattered downstairs and out to the limousine. Both piled in, and Chow sent the vehicle hurtling ahead.

Presently they halted opposite the ruins of the old Vorbling mansion. Zeng alighted, his giant servitor by his side, and studied the dismally

weather-beaten house before him. Since there were vacant lots flanking it, the hawklike man knew that this must be the place to which Geoffrey Warren had come. There were no other buildings answering the taxi driver's description.

But the house seemed tenantless and long abandoned. Neither lights nor signs of occupancy could be discerned. At last Zeng ventured toward its scabrous front steps.

"Don't make another move, Doctor," a voice from behind him commanded. "You and the big guy are covered!"

Zeng froze, while Chow gave vent to angry mutterings because he had failed to protect his master's rear. This was not the Mongol's fault, however, for the accosting voice came from around the side of the house where the speaker had lurked out of sight. And even Dr. Zeng himself could not see around corners.

But Zeng had more or less anticipated some such situation as the present one. And against this eventuality he had already decided upon a strategy of apparent surrender. At least that would get him inside his enemy's stronghold for the ultimate showdown. The odds might be greatly against him, of course—but Zeng was accustomed to battling against long odds.

He spoke a quiet word to Chow in Chinese, silencing the giant, and ordering him to make no overt move for the present. Then, under the menace of a gun he still could not see, he slowly turned until he was facing the side of the house.

"So you guessed that I might seek you out," he said to the shadows.

"I believe in being prepared," came the muffled rejoinder. "And now you will step this way, both of you. One false move'll earn you a bullet."

ZENG walked slowly toward the source of the voice, Chow at his elbow. Then their captor, a form-

less black blur, got behind them and prodded them through a side doorway into stygian interior darkness.

Here they were commanded to halt momentarily, while deft hands searched them for weapons. Zeng's automatic was confiscated, as well as Chow's sharp tong-hatchet.

Disarmed, they were again forced to move forward. Now a flashlight's ray blazed briefly in the hand of their enemy, disclosing stairs leading steeply downward. They descended, and when they had reached the musty underground room there came the click of a switch. A dim incandescent glowed to life overhead, disclosing a sparsely furnished big place, with odds and ends apparently long discarded. And for the first time, Zeng Tse-Lin got a look at his captor.

The man was enveloped in the voluminous folds of an old-fashioned opera cloak, and his features were completely concealed by a hood-mask covering his entire head from crown to throat. So tightly did this black silk material cling, however, that it disclosed a certain lumpiness of profile which even Lai Hu Chow was able to identify.

"Face bandages under mask!" the huge Asiatic yelped. "It is he who visited you today, my master! It is the young man, Pieter Vorbling the Third!"

Dr. Zeng's lips parted in a cold smile.

"Yes, it is my bandaged visitor. But not Pieter Vorbling the Third. That unfortunate youth is dead. He died in the fire which consumed his family mansion last night."

The masked man's eyes glittered through the slits in the black silk hood. "Since you're so wise, Doctor, suppose you tell me who I really am."

"Very well," Zeng said. "You are the man who wished to make the world believe you committed suicide in the mansion fire. You are Roland Foxxe!"

CHAPTER IX

CRIME PAYS OFF



THE masked man tensed. His finger tightened on the trigger of his automatic, and his voice lost its disguising quaver.

"How did you guess?" he demanded.

"It was logic, not guesswork. It began with the yacht explo-

sion, which cost many lives, all of them persons who had been intimates of Pieter Vorbling Third, including his fiancée. Then two more of his friends died mysteriously, here in the city. Why was the young man's immediate circle thus marked for death?

"A possible purpose was revealed when someone calling himself Pieter Vorbling Third appeared as the yacht disaster's sole survivor. His first move was a phone call to Geoffrey Warren. To an old man already ill of heart disease, the effect of this call was almost fatal. Had I not happened to be on hand to render medical aid, I am sure Warren would have died. And his death would have been a fiendishly cunning murder, removing another of young Vorbling's intimates."

"And the reason for this?" the masked man purred.

"Well, here was someone claiming to be Pieter Vorbling the Third. He was ready to resume life as a multimillionaire. Facial surgery had been performed on him, and any alteration of his appearance would be attributed to that surgery.

"But suppose he were an impostor not too sure his surgical disguise would pass muster? In that case he might wish to kill all of the real Vorbling's friends, leaving none to penetrate his imposture. Casual acquaintances would not matter; only close friends.

"Such a wholesale murder plot

matched the facts of the yacht explosion, which was obviously the work of a time bomb. Every violent death seemed to fit this impersonation theory. When the last of Vorbling's friends had been liquidated, the impostor could remove his bandages with no fear of detection."

"Clever reasoning," the masked man sneered. "Go on."

"Thank you," Zeng rejoined. "Now consider the impostor. To impersonate Vorbling, he must remove his true self from the scene, for obviously he could not be two men at once. So his original self must die, or at least appear to die. But how?

"A pretended suicide was the answer. And you, Roland Foxxe, had presumably killed yourself in the Vorbling mansion fire after a clumsy embezzlement—which you intended should be discovered, so that your suicide would seem logical. Therefore I began to suspect you, even though you were supposedly dead."

The man nodded his hooded head. "Nice going."

"But you needed a corpse to be identified as yourself by virtue of certain jewelry," Zeng went on. "Who was the victim? The only facts known were that he wore a beard, which you did not, and that he resembled the first Pieter Vorbling. This was brought to light by accident when a newspaper photographer made a snapshot of him in the burning mansion.

"What caused this strange resemblance? And why were repeated efforts made to destroy the picture? The explanation was simple. It is not uncommon for a man to look like his grandfather, and I am convinced our bearded man was the first Pieter Vorbling's grandson. In other words, he was Pieter Vorbling the Third!

"I think he had never gone on his yacht before the ill-starred cruise began. The limp figure which was carried on board, supposedly in a stupor, was probably a dummy. I think you

must have kidnaped young Vorbling and imprisoned him in the vacant mansion, where you could study his intimate mannerisms to perfect your forthcoming impersonation. In those three weeks he had no access to a razor, so naturally his beard grew.

"To prevent any chance of his escape, you hired two thugs to watch the house day and night. Toward the end, I think you doped him semi-conscious. Then you murdered him by setting fire to the mansion. Thus he served a double purpose. His was the body identified as your own, and his was the life into which you planned to step."

THE masked man chuckled.

"A smart scheme, eh?"

"Very," Zeng admitted. "And it might have succeeded—except for the accidental snapshot made of young Vorbling when he became conscious and realized his peril. You were afraid that photo might be correctly identified as Vorbling."

"Upon such genuine proof of his death, you would not dare impersonate him. So you went to great lengths to obtain the snapshot. You even killed the photographer who had made it. And when you learned that the film was in my possession, you visited me, hoping somehow to steal it. Your two thugs broke into my house at that same time, for the same purpose. One of them even nicked you with a bullet, not recognizing you as the man he was working for."

"And still your murder mania continued: There was an unethical plastic surgeon named Hertzig whom you had hired to alter your features so that you could pretend to be Vorbling, saved from the sea. When your plans began to misfire, you feared Hertzig might talk. So you flew north and silenced him with a knife. You *are* a pilot, Mr. Foxxe. You and Michael O'Harra once owned a plane together."

"I was hoping you might suspect

O'Harra," the masked one said. "Why didn't you?"

"For many reasons. He was a frightened man, but not a guilty one—and he did not fit the pattern of the previous murders. How, for instance, could he impersonate Vorbling when he still moved about as himself?"

"Moreover, the real Pieter Vorbling the Third had been incapable of flying a plane. So again the net of circumstantial evidence was drawn more tightly about yourself. And in conclusion, there were additional motives which only you could have had."

"Name them."

"Gladly," Zeng Tse-Lin said. "You, Roland Foxxe, had been in love with a girl named Lola Martel. She jilted you and became engaged to young Vorbling. Jealousy, therefore, was added to your greed. You wanted her to die in the yacht explosion because she had given her heart to another man. And you wanted that man dead because he had won her from you."

"And finally, you had invested your life savings in a race-track venture promoted by young Vorbling. The promotion collapsed, wiping out your small personal fortune. You deemed Vorbling responsible, and you thirsted for revenge."

"There were your motives. Jealousy, revenge, greed and hatred. Combined, they made a murderous maniac of you. Now you have Ann Carter and Geoffrey Warren here as prisoners, to be killed so that they can never unmask you. Later you will probably eliminate Michael O'Harra. Then you will be safe in your impersonation of Pieter Vorbling the Third. His last close friend will be gone."

The masked man laughed weirdly.

"You are right. Only I won't have to wait to knock O'Harra off. I've got him in this cellar, too. You'll all die together, my clever Dr. Zeng, just as soon as you hand me that photograph and negative."

"Suppose I refuse?"

"You won't dare—unless you'd like to see the girl tortured. I've got four more thugs on tap who'd love that job!"

He pressed another switch, lighting the far end of the subterranean room. There Zeng saw Ann Carter, Geoffrey Warren and Michael O'Harra. The men were trussed and helpless, guarded by a quartette of sullen looking and scowling hoodlums with drawn guns.

The girl was not bound, except for her wrists, and they were held above her head around the neck of a big red, grinning Buddha. She was guarded by a huge Chinese who held her binding ropes wrapped around one hairy fist. He was naked to the waist, bald as a yellow billiard ball, and brassy rings dangled from his long, thick ears.

What Dr. Zeng thought at that sight he did not display by a single facial expression.

He shrugged. "It is written that swift death is easier than prolonged agony," he said. "Therefore I shall give you what you desire, and then I beg of you to make an end of us, quickly."

"Now you're being smart. Let's have the picture."

"My servant has it," Zeng stated. He looked at Chow. "Produce what is necessary from where it is hidden, O mighty one."

CHOW understood. He squatted on the floor, tugged at his artificial leg and disclosed the hollow space within that member. But it was no snapshot he extracted. It was an automatic, which he suddenly hurled at Zeng.

The hawk-like man caught it, and it seemed as if the weapon spat yammering fire while it was still in mid-air, so swiftly did Zeng go into trigger-action. His first slug smashed at the gun in the masked Roland Foxxe's hand, knocking it from the murderer's grasp.

His next went through the evilly grinning mouth of Ann's captor, just as the huge Chinese snatched a gun from his waist-band and fired—too late. The slug from the Oriental's weapon went wild as he crashed to the floor, dragging Ann and the Buddha along with him.

Then the cellar became a volcano's heart, erupting thunderous explosions and bright flashes of death-flame.

Roland Foxxe's four hired gunsels, after their first instant of stunned surprise, came surging forward in unison, spraying bullets. Zeng went down on his belly, aiming and firing as coolly as if he were on a target range. Two thugs went toppling, and then a third, before Zeng's ammunition ran out.

The remaining hoodlum drew a bead on the prone doctor, like an executioner preparing to do his job. In another second, his slug would end Zeng's career forever, because Zeng had no time to roll toward cover.

Then Chow surged upright on his one good leg. He swung his disconnected artificial limb like a baseball bat; let fly with it. There was a hideous sound of impact as it connected with the gunman's head, braining him.

"Excellent, my giant!" Zeng Tse-Lin said, and scrambled to his feet—just in time to meet the infuriated charge of the maniacal Roland Foxxe.

With a madman's superhuman strength, the masked murderer ripped into the tall, hawklike one who had wrecked his insane plans.

It was no ordinary battle that followed. Zeng doubled over as a kick took him in the groin. Sickened pain flooded him. With a terrific effort he straightened up, smashing his fist into Foxxe's hooded and bandaged features.

Blood spurted from behind the mask as surgical wounds reopened and sutures broke apart. But the crazy man seemed to feel nothing. He charged again, clawing and kick-

ing and punching. Getting in close, he tried to sink his teeth in Zeng's jugular.

"Boss!" Chow bleated. "Knockee devil out of him, quickee! You letee him killee you, me never forgivee you as longee as you live!"

Zeng Tse-Lin grinned and dislodged his squalling enemy. Then, like an uncoiling spring, he catapulted at the madman and wrapped iron arms around his torso. He squeezed.

The sensation was one which he would remember forever. Foxxe's body resisted that tremendous pressure for a moment. But slowly, inexorably, Zeng's strength told. The kill-crazy Foxxe moaned as his breath was driven from his lungs.

Through slits in the mask, his eyes bulged horribly in fear. He squirmed ineffectually, and then there was a crunching of gristle and a splintering of bones as his ribs collapsed.

He went limp, and he died with a curse upon his lips.

By that time, Chow had recovered his artificial leg and attached it. He lumbered toward the prisoners in the cellar, and released them.

Ann Carter was the first to be freed. When she was lifted from the floor she came swaying toward Dr. Zeng Tse-Lin, pallid, shaken. But her eyes were starry with gratitude.

"Zeng!" she whispered. "You saved us all!" For a moment she clung to him, sweetly fragrant and trembling.

He knew that he had other work still to do. Brian Carter must be notified, for the police must come to clean up this scene of carnage. But for the present, Zeng was content merely to hold Ann in an embrace which could not last.

This was his reward. And what better recompense could any fighting man desire?

Next Issue: MURDER ON FURLOUGH, Novelet by Marvin Ryerson

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Not much longer could flesh and blood endure that withering fire

Crucible of Tragedy

By EDWARD O'CONNOR

*Faced with a terrible choice, oil-well driller
Danny Breen finds himself tested as by fire!*

D'ANNY BREEN dropped one shoe on the shack's oily floor. He lounged wearily on the edge of the cot, too tired to complete his preparations for bed. Outside the shack the floodlights of the night riggers lit up the surroundings almost as bright as day. Ageless cypress trees with their peculiar hangings of Spanish moss; a sky so brilliant and so

low that it seemed one could reach up and grab a handful of stars.

Danny told himself that he hated it all. Hated it with a bitter, biased hatred. The ceaseless rains, the enervating heat, sleepless nights and tortured days, bugs of every known variety, flying cockroaches that bounded off the walls like tennis balls and added to his sleeplessness. And

the sticky Louisiana heat was unlike anything else in the world. It tore at your flesh like hot pincers when you moved.

But he had promised Bruce McFarland that he would stick 'til the oil well came in; and it was due now. Perhaps the night crew would bring it in.

Danny blew out a weary breath. He wondered where Bohannon had gone and the thought made him shudder. It had been plain hell, the past three months. This semi-tropical Gulf climate was murder to Danny, that and the heart-breaking work. Then add the shadow of the electric chair—

It was Bohannon who had suggested this Cajun country as their hideout. Bohannon was an expert in such things. Danny cursed silently as he thought of the deadly little crook. It was Bohannon who had tricked him into apparent complicity in that K. C. warehouse job.

The watchman had been murdered in the getaway, but all Danny knew about it was what Bohannon had told him, and what he had read in the newspapers since. He had a hazy recollection of drinking with Bohannon that evening. The next morning he read about what he and Bohannon were supposed to have done at the warehouse. There had been no witnesses, but the police hinted they had ideas.

BOHANNON had been liberal in the matter of getaway money. A guy doesn't stop to figure the source of necessities. Necessity recognizes no law. It was Bohannon who said that if people were to stop to figure where every dollar they handled had come from they would get some shocking surprises.

Danny guessed they might at that. He had always followed the oil fields himself; and a guy certainly didn't have to apologize for the dough he earned there, because he certainly earned it. If only he hadn't got

tangled up with Bohannon in K. C. But there wasn't anything he could do about that now. He'd just been a sucker, that's all; and a guy couldn't afford to be a sucker more than once, at the outside.

Danny wished bitterly that he had stayed in Oklahoma originally, where he had known his way around. But there were some mighty fine people down in this Gulf swamp country, Danny mused. Warmly, he wished he could have known them under different circumstances.

Bruce McFarland, the guy he was working for, was one of the finest. And Bruce's daughter, Annie. Well, Danny couldn't let his thoughts dwell long on her. Annie hadn't tried to disguise her feelings toward Danny. She had been entirely too straightforward about it, in fact.

Danny started wearily to unbutton his sweaty shirt. Then the outer door banged and interrupted his reflections, abruptly bringing him back to stark reality. The connecting door popped open, and in the light of the pressure torch Danny saw the grotesque outlines of Bohannon. Small, shriveled, his lined face depicting evil incarnate. Bohannon had tried to dye his white hair and the result was a bilious green.

"Danny!" he snarled out. "We gotta hit the grit outa here."

His small rat-like face, shoved forward from between bony shoulders, reminded Danny of a vulture he had seen out in the swamp. Bohannon was patently scared—deadly.

"What's happened? Where you been?" asked Danny.

Bohannon had just returned from the sleepy little village of Arcadia. Danny didn't have long to wait for an explanation. Bohannon's claw-like fingers dug into Danny's shoulder and in the eerie light of the lantern the little crook's eyes shone strangely.

"Bart Keeney! He's here—I saw him in Arcadia!" Bohannon gritted.

"The K. C. detective? But how

could he have known?"

The village of Arcadia was ten miles north of McFarland's farm where the wildcat oil well was located, but the only way one had of getting out either to the east or the west was first through the village of Arcadia. Impenetrable swamp surrounded this neck of land in all other directions.

Bohannon made an impatient noise deep in his scrawny throat. "As if you didn't know," he snorted.

Of course, Danny knew that Bart Keeney had been assigned to the case. The newspapers had made a great story about it. Bart Keeney, the human bloodhound. The lawman who always brought 'em back. And no matter where they tried to hide.

THE breath bunched in Danny's throat. He was more afraid, not for himself, but because of Annie McFarland's father. The kindest, cleanest-minded man he had ever met. For a few fleeting seconds Danny's brain whirled uselessly.

Bruce McFarland had known from the first that Danny Breen was wanted by the law. He hadn't said as much. He didn't have to. But Danny knew that the fine old Scot knew his secret, knew it from the many things that had transpired during the past three months.

And Bruce McFarland would be guilty of a felony—for knowingly harboring a fugitive from justice.

The snake-eyed Bohannon was studying Danny's boyish face.

"Here's the set-up," Bohannon gritted. "We snatch the old guy and his daughter, make 'em drive us through Arcadia, and if anybody tries to stop us—"

Bohannon broke off and grinned evilly as Danny went suddenly taut.

"The old guy likes you—and the pretty little daughter is gone on you, too, Danny," he went on significantly. "It'll be a cinch. They'll come along without—"

Danny's angry growl stopped Bohannon cold. Danny's youthful power was bunched in his wide shoulders as he rose suddenly and shoved Bohannon crashingly against the farther wall.

The little killer snarled like a cornered animal and in the dim light Danny saw the automatic that suddenly leaped into Bohannon's bony fingers.

"Okay," Bohannon gritted. "I'll knock you off—right now! I'm through with you, anyhow."

Swiftly Danny yanked on his other shoe, determined to rid himself of this human vulture. But it was then that another enemy struck, struck with that most dreaded weapon of the oil-field—fire!

Danny heard it even as he tensed to hurl himself at the snarling killer who had wrecked his life. That rumbling growl made him forget Bohannon. He whirled around, hurling himself in a dead run for the outside door. As he flung it open he halted abruptly, a painful constriction caught his throat and lungs.

There could be no mistaking that tall, heavy figure approaching the shack. The searing light of the derrick fire brought out the rugged features—even the cold, calculating eyes.

"Bart Keeney!" Danny gasped.

Just a split-second did Danny hesitate. Then he sprang past the cold-eyed detective and sprinted desperately down to the very edge of the bayou, heading for the well. Keeney could shoot and be hanged!

MEN were jumping frantically from the derrick floor. A dark form slid down the safety rope from the scaffolding while, thrust upward by a rush of escaping gas, the great drill stem began to pound furiously. With dismayed eyes Danny saw a spearhead of flame whistling up from the well. Like an avid tongue of some subterranean monster, that long blue

shaft licked hungrily about the base of the derrick, and second by second the roar deepened.

Bruce McFarland was uncoiling a length of fire hose, but the column of water he was playing toward the derrick was so feeble that it was driven back into his very face. Not enough water pressure, Danny realized.

"How did it happen?" he shouted at McFarland above the roar of the lurid flames. Danny had an unpleasant idea that Bohannon might have figured in this somehow.

"We struck a gas pocket!" McFarland's face was streaked with mud and sweat and his thick mustache looked grotesque. "Wind blew it toward the boilers and it caught. The whole thing was in a blaze in a second. I've tried to reach the blow-out preventer, but the flames drove me back."

Danny's wide eyes had been straining toward that blow-out preventer even as McFarland mentioned it. There was a solid wall of wild flame guarding it now. But it was the only possible chance.

Danny knew that McFarland and Annie had every cent they could borrow tied up in this well. It represented the hopes and dreams of a lifetime to them. And now it seemed certain that it was doomed to go up in flames. Failure now meant a lifetime of effort on the part of the McFarlands to repay creditors. Annie had been doing the work of three women in her effort to help her father. Danny Breen knew all this and his own problems were forgotten in that knowledge.

In this confusion he could have made good his escape, perhaps. Escape from the penalty of murder—but Danny wasn't thinking of that. He didn't even allow himself to think that right now Bart Keeney was waiting to arrest him along with Bohannon.

"We can't shut off the gas, and the flames will cut that derrick like

cheese," McFarland's despairing voice cut through the haze in Danny's whirling brain.

Danny knew what would happen. He had seen it happen before, in Oklahoma. That blazing gas would melt the legs of the derrick like a blowtorch and bring the whole structure crashing to the ground. And crumbling beneath the tremendous pressure, the well might blow out at any second. Danny knew what that was sure to mean.

"Losing the well," oil men called it. Thousands of feet of drill pipe whirling and twisting up out of the well, tearing its way through the derrick, leaving behind a path of black destruction. Ruin and despair for two people Danny loved.

Just one chance remained—to reach the blow-out preventer. If they could close that wheel, they might cut off all passage for the escaping gas. But to reach the blow-out preventer meant entering that deadly zone of flames; it meant treading on ground that at any second might become the crater of a volcano.

McFarland had tried and failed. And that was before the flames were as bad as they were right now. And why should he take a chance like that? Danny didn't question reasons.

IN AN instant he made his decision. Waving some men to follow, he ran to a pile of corrugated iron sections left over from the boiler house.

"Bring those sledge hammers," he ordered. "We'll build a shield and skid it toward the blow-out preventer. All I ask you guys to do is to help me get it started, that's all."

Instantly they caught the idea. Two men helped him lift the heavy wooden skids they had used to bring in the boilers. With spikes and sledge hammers Danny began pounding together two sections of corrugated iron, making a crude, wedge-shaped metal shield, held upright on the skids. Be-

hind this he might force his way forward to the blow-out preventer.

Danny worked swiftly, while the men cast fearful glances at the mounting flames, each man knowing that if the blow-out came, they faced swift annihilation. A race against time, with precious little time to spare. A race against the most violent of deaths. The men were falling back before that paralyzing threat.

Finally Danny was ready. "Get back, men. I'll take it alone."

As he looked up he saw Annie McFarland running toward him. Frantically he waved her back. "Get out of here!" his shout rose above the roar of the flames. "Get back across the bayou!"

She shook her head and her eyes seemed to shine in the blazing glow of the flames. "Not unless you do," she answered.

Danny knew little about such things, but even to him it was obvious that the concern in Annie's sweet voice was for him, not the oil well.

A new rumble sounded deep down beneath the earth, as of a giant awakening, and the flames darted skyward. With a yell of dismay men bolted down the bayou. The well was getting ready to blow.

Danny swore as he pulled on his heavy leather gloves. Too bad they had no asbestos fire suits. Nobody was left now except Annie and her father. Once more he shouted to the girl: "Get out of here!"

"I want to help. Tell me what I can do," she pleaded.

"Have it your way." He reached down, thrust the nozzle of a fire hose in her hand. "Just keep us wet!"

Then, nodding to McFarland, he set his powerful shoulders to the metal shield and heaved. Slowly it moved, the wooden skids leaving a deep rut in the wet earth. Straining, lifting, pushing, the two men made their way forward foot by foot, while behind them Annie played a steady stream of

water over their heads and shoulders.

Heads down, toes gripping the earth, they strained on in agonized desperation. The air grew hotter. Twice, tossed by the wind, a sheet of flame swept over them. The resultant steam from his wet clothes blinded Danny.

Annie directed them by motioning. They shifted according to her directions and resumed their dogged advance in the face of that searing flame. Nearer now. They were passing the mud pit. A few feet more and they would reach the derrick's concrete base. Danny drove his tortured muscles by sheer will.

Once he slipped and fell with a sickening thud that knocked the breath out of his throbbing body. But in an instant he was up and heaving again.

STILL closer. He could hear the thump of the drill pipe against the roar of the rushing gas. To the right the foundation blocks came into view. The wheel of the blow-out preventer would be just ahead. Out of the flames the derrick loomed over them, and high up Danny could see the wooden planks of the scaffold flooring blaze. Even as he looked a portion collapsed in burning fragments, hitting the slush pit with a hiss, spattering them with mud. A hot splinter struck him painfully.

It had to be now or not at all. Danny gritted his teeth.

Not much longer could flesh and blood endure that withering inferno of fire. Danny saw the elderly legs of Bruce McFarland stagger. A last frantic shove, and Danny could see the wheel. He reached out, a tongue of flame lashed down at him hungrily, blistering his arm, causing him to jerk back in pain.

Racked with coughing, choked with fumes, he held his hot face to the ground and waited. The wind veered, the flame passed. Reaching out, he seized the wheel.

It refused to move! Pitilessly the heat seared him as with every ounce of ebbing strength he wrenched at the wheel. Slowly, grudgingly, it turned; little by little he felt the valve closing and heard the diminishing hiss of gas. Once more from above a shower of burning débris rained down upon him. He reeled, but with one last effort jammed the wheel closed. The valve shut and in a roar of defeat the flames went out.

Danny turned toward his blistered companion. "We got her," he croaked. "We've—"

The triumphant shout died in his tortured throat as he leaped. Just in time, he saw the flaming plank hurtling down onto the unsuspecting head of Bruce McFarland. He was just in time to take the full impact himself, but he had thrown the older man clear. Fireworks exploded inside his tortured head, then total blackness closed in around Danny.

Danny floated out of the blackness at last and peered out beneath the heavy bandage. Then he blinked. Annie McFarland's hazel eyes were looking anxiously into his face and telling him things that he didn't want to know. Impulsively she pressed her lips very softly against his cheek. Danny thought it felt like the pressure of a warm, velvety rose.

"You're all right now, Danny," the girl breathed thankfully. "You were wonderful, and you saved Dad's life, I'm sure."

Danny's eyes wandered to the window, to the neat little curtains; the obvious femininity of the surroundings. Why, this was Annie McFarland's own room! Why had they brought him here? Why hadn't they taken him to his own cabin? He stirred uneasily, and Annie's soothing hand sought his bandaged one.

"You took care of me," he murmured wonderingly. He lay back on the white pillow and for a brief moment he almost forgot the dread that had weighed so heavily on his mind

for the past three months. Then it returned with increased impact.

Danny wanted, more than anything else in the world, to be clean in the eyes of Annie McFarland and her father. And how could that ever be? His tortured eyes followed the girl as she did countless little things about the room, all for his own comfort. His mind was in a turmoil.

HE MOVED his legs experimentally. They functioned, apparently, though they were very sore. If he could only get out of here, perhaps he could avoid Bart Keeney and the law—at least for a while. He groaned then as he discovered he was wearing one of Bruce McFarland's old-fashioned night shirts.

Annie whirled at the sound.

"Where are my clothes?" he demanded.

She came back to the bed smilingly. "You're not going to leave that bed until Doctor Le Bleau says so," she told him gently. "He says you need rest above all else."

Rest! Danny thought ironically. He hadn't had any such thing for what seemed to him like a lifetime. Vaguely he wondered why the girl hadn't said anything about Bart Keeney. He wondered why Keeney hadn't been in to see him.

Doubtless the detective figured that his chances for a getaway were nil, anyway. Keeney could pick him up whenever he wanted to. Danny felt that Keeney must have arrested Bohannon. It felt like a century since Danny had left them at his cabin.

He sighed miserably. Annie was busy again and now she was humming contentedly as she went about her own work. She was putting on fresh boric acid compresses to soothe his burning flesh. But his heart and brain were beyond anybody's ministering.

"One careless act can destroy a life's work," Danny reflected bitterly. Well, let Keeney and the law come.

It couldn't be undone now.

Annie broke into his bleak reverie. "Daddy is going to make you a partner—a full partner in the oil well. After all, we wouldn't have the well if it hadn't been for you. And Daddy might have been killed besides."

"You're taking a lot for granted," Danny replied miserably.

Annie's eyes widened in shocked surprise. But the question on her lips died in her throat. Danny throttled it. Like a bursting dam, his words flowed thick and fast. Bitterly, he told her why she would have to forget him. Why she would have to understand that once and for all. In the midst of his confession an authoritative knock sounded at the door.

Danny motioned for Annie to open the door. She obeyed him without a word. She passed the cold-eyed detective at the door and glanced back at Danny, but his attention was focused on the big man.

Detective Bart Keeney nodded a greeting, his face expressionless. He waited for the door to close behind Annie McFarland, then he glanced down at Danny Breen, studying him closely, silently. Then he spoke.

"That was a pretty swell thing you did, young fellow." The big detective's voice was plainly complimentary. "Yeah, a real swell thing." He turned then, started for the door. "I just wanted to tell you that."

Tension tore at Danny's nerves.

"Hey!" he yelled. "What is this?"

The detective turned and regarded him with a look of mild surprise.

"What do you mean?" he asked mildly. Then, as if it were an afterthought, added: "Oh, while you were doing that swell act a guy named Bohannon—a crook who killed a watchman in a K. C. warehouse job—tried to get away and I had to shoot him."

"You mean he's dead?"

"That's right. So that closes the case as far's the law is concerned. You see, we happen to know that the kid Bohannon tried to frame when he was—well, we know the kid didn't really have anything to do with it. Well, so long—and good luck."

Danny closed his eyes as Bart Keeney closed the door.

He opened them again when he heard the door softly open once more, then as softly close again. Annie McFarland's soft white arms went around his neck and Bruce McFarland stood grinning behind her. Danny blinked as he noted the baseball bat held by Bruce McFarland.

"It's my idea of a shotgun wedding, Danny," Bruce McFarland explained, grinning and raising the ball bat. "I'm not handling this baseball bat because I'm Joe DiMaggio either."

"I get it. I get it." Danny's voice was muffled in Annie McFarland's soft brown hair.

NO FINER DRINK...



The CONFIDENTIAL BODYGUARD

By DALE CLARK

Steve Kelly, private detective, takes on a little job of lady protecting, and steps right into the middle of a slight case of murder for profit!

CHAPTER I

BARGAIN IN BODYGUARDS



HE phone rang. Steve Kelly walked out of the back room, which was his bedroom, into the front room, which was his office.

Kelly picked up the instrument and said:

"Kelly's Confidential"

A woman's voice answered.

"I've just read your advertisement in the classified directory."

"Yes?"

"The ad says you have armed bodyguards for hire."

"That's right," Kelly said.

"How much do you charge?" the woman's voice asked.

"It depends," said Kelly. "What kind of a job is this? How long will you need the bodyguard?"

"Oh, not long," the woman said.

"An hour or so. I'm at the Union Station now. I'm going to an address in Laurel Canyon, staying there fifteen minutes or so, and then return-

ing downtown. I'm sure it won't take two hours."

Kelly's eyebrows went up as he listened. Bodyguard calls were generally of a commercial nature. Sometimes, late at night, a person who had been lucky at a gambling joint and was afraid of being robbed on the way home would hire an armed escort. But it was usually straight business—more often than not a traveling representative carrying samples for a fur or a jewelry firm who didn't want to take chances between the railroad station and the hotel vault.

He thought for a moment, then said:

"Ten dollars."

There was a pause before the woman said:

"Don't you think that's pretty steep—five dollars an hour?"

"It isn't the time," Kelly pointed out, "it's the protection you're buying. If you really need a bodyguard, you can't expect an operative to risk his life for less."

"But there's no danger," the woman protested.

"No?" Kelly said.

"Not for a man. It's just that I'm

A BAFFLING MYSTERY NOVELET



The blonde had Kelly's own gun pointing at him

all by myself, and I don't trust cab drivers, especially when it's so dark and lonely up there in the canyon at night. I'd feel safer with a trustworthy companion." The voice quavered. "That is, if I could afford to hire one."

KELLY pictured an elderly, timid soul. He pictured her as old enough to be Kelly's mother, at least. She was probably from out of town, and probably needlessly alarmed about the dangers of the city.

"No agency in town is going to tackle the job for less than ten dollars," he told her. "You couldn't even hire a gigolo from an escort service for less than that, and you'd have to pay expenses. You'd be stuck for the man's cab fare to the station, and then for a cab to and from the canyon. I couldn't possibly quote you a lower figure, if I send a man out on the job."

"Well—I—"

"Wait a minute," Kelly said. "I'll tell you what I can do. I can meet you with my car. The ten dollars stands, but it'd be saving you the other expenses."

She hesitated. "That's your best offer?"

He had not been making a bid for the job, and Kelly told her so.

"I don't *want* the job," he said. "I'd advise you to hire a cab, put your trust in the driver, and save your money. The chances are a million to one you wouldn't have any trouble at all. That's my advice, and it's free. I'm simply telling you what I can do, if you're in a position to spend ten dollars for a service you probably don't really need."

"Well," the voice said. "Well, you can meet me in the Fred Harvey restaurant here. I'll be at a table as close to the entrance as I can get. I'm wearing a blue coat and a blue hat, and besides there'll be a book on the table—the 'American Doctor's Odyssey.' Can you remember that?"

"Sure," said Kelly. "What's the name?"

"It's Mrs. Cosgrave."

"Okay," Kelly said. "I'll find you, all right."

Purely as a matter of routine, he removed his coat, opened a top desk drawer, and hauled out a leather harness. Kelly was left-handed, so the holster fitted up snugly to his right shoulder. Its leather-clad spring and retaining clip imprisoned a .38 Bankers' Special.

He wasn't expecting that kind of trouble, though. When Mrs. Cosgrave had mentioned an "armed bodyguard," she had doubtless only been quoting the words of the classified advertisement. Kelly was more interested, really, in making sure he had cigarettes in his pocket.

"Boy Scout stuff," he thought. "My good deed for the day."

There wasn't anything about Mrs. Cosgrave's appearance to contradict this idea of his, when he sauntered through the Los Angeles Union Station and found the blue-cloaked, blue-hatted woman in the restaurant. She was not quite as old as he had imagined, true. She might have been thirty-five or forty.

Nor was she quite the timid, shrinking, abashed soul that her voice had suggested. She had quite a square chin, in fact, and her brown eyes were determined rather than appealing.

"You're Kelly?" she asked.

"Yes, sure. You ready?"

A nod. "If I pay you half of the money now, and the rest when you're through, will that be satisfactory?"

BUSINESSLIKE, you see. But a perfectly respectable, quiet, spinsterish sort. Like a middle-aged schoolma'm, Kelly thought. Maybe, in spite of the "Mrs." attached to her name, she *was* a schoolteacher.

His experienced eye took in the rig of the neat blue hat and the tailored blue cloak. She had the five dollars

ready, in the outer compartment of her black leather handbag, so there was no opportunity for him to see how much money that she had tucked away in its inner purse.

But Kelly would have bet her funds were mostly in the form of travelers' checks.

"Any baggage?" he asked.

"I checked it. . . . Where's your car?"

"Out in front." He guided her through the station, across the parking oval outside. He noticed, while he held the coupé door open, that her shoes were low-heeled and unstylish and just as sensible as the rest of her costume.

"Where to?" he asked, idling the motor.

"Just take Laurel Canyon. I'll tell you when to turn off."

"You've been here before, then," said Kelly.

"Yes," she admitted, taciturnly.

By this time, Kelly was changing his theory about her. But not changing it much, at that. Everything fitted his slightly changed theory. The brusque, business-like tone which could easily be a device to hide her shyness. The careful way that she handled her money.

And her clothes—her clothes, especially. They were of good enough quality, proving she was not handicapped by extreme poverty. But no woman under forty would have worn such uniformly sensible garments—unless she was afraid of something.

Afraid of criticism, Kelly suspected. She would not risk putting on something pretty and stylish and youthful, for fear of appearing ridiculous, for fear people would laugh at her.

She was not the elderly, timid type he had first imagined, but she was close to it. She was the middle-agedly nervous, neurotic sort.

In short, she was just the kind who *would* be distrustful of cab drivers and afraid of dark canyons. If the

full truth were known, she was maybe the kind who enjoyed obsessions along such lines.

Kelly was somewhat cynical about this. He had once been driven almost nuts by a client who fancied she was being followed by strange men at night, and so on. All imagination, of course, in the end. He hoped to heaven Mrs. Cosgrove wasn't going to turn out like *that*.

In the meantime, though, he had his hands and feet and eyes busy with the Los Angeles traffic—the more so, because Kelly was himself a native son driver. That is to say, he had been brought up to look on yellow lights as invitations rather than caution signals. And he considered a zig-zag course from traffic lane to traffic lane as much the shortest distance down the street.

If Mrs. Cosgrave's fingers clutched her handbag nervously, therefore, Kelly's driving was excuse enough for it. And if her agitation became even more pronounced after they had swung into Laurel Canyon—well, the Laurel Canyon grade is narrow, is winding, and is steep. Moreover, it was wet in spots. Kelly drove it by ear, gauging his speed by the scream of tires on the curves.

"Here!" she gasped at length.

KELLY shot the coupé into a side road, glimpsed a "Street End" warning, and practically parachuted to a stop in front of hewn rock wall.

"Want me to wait?" he asked.

The woman stopped pushing her feet against the floor boards.

"It's the second house above," she said in a thin, strained voice. "You come along with me. You brought a gun, didn't you?"

Kelly looked at her. "Do I need a gun?" he asked.

She got out of the car stiffly, her purse clutched in one hand, the book in the other.

"You might," she said. "They've killed snakes on the steps here."

Kelly said he would rather take a club to a snake than use a gun, any day. Shooting snakes was probably all right for cowboys using a seven-and-a-half inch-barreled Peacemaker. He doubted plenty if he could shoot the head off a snake before the snake got good and mad.

"Okay," he said, unhinging a flashlight from the steering column. "We'll look out for snakes."

CHAPTER II

THE LADY TAKES A POWDER



HE steps were irregular, hewn out of the hillside, taking advantage of the natural stone strata. Mrs. Cosgrave, Kelly noticed, took these irregularities in her stride. She had been up these steps, not once, but many times. She knew them by heart, unconsciously.

It was a hillside house, of course, but it didn't show any of the modern influence, architecturally. It was a kind of a Cape Cod house, stuck onto the slope by main force of concrete. An electric bulb hidden in a hurricane lamp lighted the porch. There were lights inside the place, too, but nobody answered the door chimes.

"They know you're coming?" Kelly asked.

She nodded. "Yes. I telephoned from the station. I can't understand this."

Kelly couldn't understand it, either, except by assuming that the occupants of the house didn't want to see Mrs. Cosgrave. He walked along the porch to a French window and looked in through the slats of the Venetian blind at an apparently empty room.

"You want to wait?" he asked.

Mrs. Cosgrave had fumbled in her handbag for a pencil. She began writing vigorously in the fly page of her

"American Doctor's Odyssey." Having written nearly a pageful, she tore out the page, folded it neatly, and slipped the creased paper under the door.

"Maybe you ought to wait a few minutes," Kelly suggested. "They might have just gone out to pick up some Scotch or smokes. It won't cost you any more to wait a little while."

"No." She shook her head. "It'll just have to be this way, now. Come along."

"It's your party," Kelly said, with a shrug.

He didn't care. Why should he? It was of no interest to him if Mrs. Cosgrave didn't want to talk about the affair. Moreover, she had not paid him to listen.

He drove her back out of the canyon.

"Wait," she said, as they came out on Sunset Boulevard. "Pull into one of these stations."

What she wanted was a look at the phone book. When she came back, she had a scribbled street address. She showed it to Kelly.

"Would it be extra?" she asked. "Stopping here on our way downtown?"

Kelly looked at the address. It would not be the shortest way downtown, but by taking Highland to Wilshire, it wouldn't be more than a handful of blocks off the route. And she had not used up her fifteen minute stop in the canyon.

"Okay, okay," he said.

It was an apartment courts this time—duplexes built to surround a courtyard. From the way Mrs. Cosgrave hesitated and consulted the numbers along the entrances, she was not on such familiar terms with this place as she was with that one back in the side street.

"The number you want would be at the back," Kelly said.

There was more hesitation on her part. "You can wait here," she finally decided, and walked off.

KELLY lighted a cigarette. A fountain splashed in the middle of the courtyard, into a pool with a circular concrete rim. He parked himself on the rim, stretched his legs, and yawned. A girl came out of a doorway, across the courtyard.

"Now, if *she* needed a bodyguard," Kelly thought plaintively.

But her type wouldn't—unless she wanted to shoo the movie scouts away. Or the guys who pretended to be movie scouts.

Her French heels tap-tapped rapidly past Kelly. He looked after her, and saw with amazement a ladder running from knee to heel of her silk stocking.

"Dear Emily Post," Kelly thought. "How does a gentleman notify a strange blonde to go change her socks?"

It was at that moment that the Cosgrave woman screamed.

Kelly leaped up, running. The duplexes shared entrances, with 18-20—that was the one Mrs. Cosgrave had wanted—bracketed together. He slammed into the little hallway as Mrs. Cosgrave backed through a door toward him, gabbling incoherent sounds while she pointed.

"Hades sleigh bells!" Kelly exclaimed.

He barged past his client, into the middle of a murder. The young man who sprawled on the floor of Apartment 18 had a crushed skull and a stab wound in his chest. The blood was still warm, and liquid.

But the youth was dead.

Kelly sent a dazed glance about the room. He was not looking for clues, and the glance passed mechanically over the bloodied knife on the table. He ignored the book-end on the floor, too. He was looking for a phone, and finally he spotted it, tucked away in a wall niche in a smaller hallway that branched back into the apartment. Under the niche a door stood ajar, revealing the location of the phone directory.

Kelly went into the hallway, started to reach for the phone, and then remembered to drop his handkerchief around it before he dialed.

"Police Headquarters," somebody said, in a moment, and he said:

"Homicide Bureau." He didn't enjoy the friendship of any Homicide detective, so it made no difference who took the call.

"I want to report a murder," Kelly said to Homicide. He reported it. "Steve Kelly," he said, giving them his office address and his private license number. It was all routine thus far. "A woman hired me to bring her here—"

He remembered to look around. Mrs. Cosgrave was gone. And somehow, he knew she was *gone*.

"Wait a minute," he said. "You'd better send a squad car to—"

And he stopped. Because, he didn't even know the house number or the name of the side street to which he had first driven Mrs. Cosgrave. He could go straight there, but he couldn't tell the cops where to go.

"What?" Homicide was saying.

Kelly swallowed. "Nothing," he said hastily. "See you later."

The first thing Kelly did when he cradled the telephone was to make sure that Mrs. Cosgrave had skipped. Which wasn't hard to do. She wasn't in the courtyard, nor had she taken refuge in Kelly's coupé. What she had taken was a powder.

Kelly swore fervently, staring up and down the street.

She couldn't have gone far, in the minute or so he had used in reciting facts and street addresses to the Homicide Bureau. That is, afoot. She might have been dummy-lucky enough, though, to have run into a roving cab when she dashed out of the courtyard.

If so, Kelly could make a guess at where she was heading.

"It's none of my business!" he told himself, but unfortunately he couldn't believe that.

Nor was he thinking of it from the standpoint of loyalty to a client—client who had paid him five dollars, plunged him into a murder mix-up, and then taken her fancy-free French leave. If you asked Kelly, he didn't owe such a client a nickel's worth of loyalty.

Kelly was thinking that the police would be plenty sore.

Not just because Mrs. Cosgrave had been the one to walk in and find the body, either. When she had gone into the filling station and copied off this address, the chances were she had telephoned here. Or tried to. Homicide would want to know whether she had talked to the victim, those few minutes ago. It would be an important bit of material evidence, helping to fix the time of the assault, if she had.

Yes, the cops would be plenty sore at Kelly. They would feel that Kelly, letting the witness slip through his fingers so easily, was just too dumb to be trusted with a private badge.

He couldn't see where he had been so dumb. Looking for the phone, and notifying the police had been the normal and the legally necessary first step. There had been no way for him to know Mrs. Cosgrave intended to take a powder.

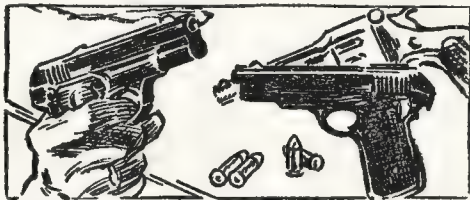
Only the police might not believe this. They would be just as apt to believe Kelly had deliberately advised his client to get the heck out of here. It wouldn't be the first time a material witness had vanished, to surrender subsequently through the services of a first-class lawyer.

By the time Kelly had convinced the Homicide men about his version of the affair, it might be too late to find her. For he thought he knew where Mrs. Cosgrave would go, if she had the sense of a gosling.

He jumped into his coupé. The men from Headquarters were not going to like this, either, but how could he help it?

Kelly drove like fury.

This time he didn't swerve off the Laurel Canyon road into the side street. He braked fifty feet past the corner and ran back. If the Cosgrave woman returned, he didn't want her to be frightened by discovering his



parked car. He hoped she would hurry up the steps, into his grasp again.

If she wasn't already here, or had been here!

HE DASHED up those steps himself, went down on his knees in front of the door, and whipped out his penknife. Using its blade, he fished for the folded fly page—fished vainly. She *had* beaten him to it. Or else, she had tapped the note smartly enough so that it had slid well inside onto the floor. "Invitation to burglary," Kelly thought.

As a preliminary, he put his thumb onto the push button and trilled the chimes. He didn't expect an answer, and the footfalls came as a surprise.

The man who answered was a lank, clean-shaven, bald-pated individual wearing a definitely sour expression.

"Yes?" he intoned at Kelly.

Kelly dipped two fingers of his right hand into his vest pocket and flashed a rolled gold badge. The badge said:

Licensed Private Detective

Kelly's fingers, from professional habit, gripped the shield in such a way that only the last of the three words was clearly visible.

"I'll take that note, brother," he said confidently.

"I beg your pardon?" the bald man said.

Kelly borrowed the tone of a traffic cop asking where was the fire.

"The note that was stuck under

your door tonight," he said.

The householder looked blank. "I'm sorry, Officer, but you must have the wrong address. This is the Afna place. You probably want the Clintwell house, the one below here."

He said it smoothly and surely. He made an excellent job of his acting. The guy knew his onions, Kelly reflected unhappily. He was just exactly the kind of a citizen you should never risk any gags on, such as impersonating an officer.

Kelly had no choice, though, except a now or never choice. This Afna, whoever he was, clearly didn't intend to admit there had been a note. If Kelly didn't take him now, the note would be destroyed the minute that he turned his back.

So Kelly said jarringly:

"Now look here, you! I already picked up the Cosgrave dame, see? So I know, and there ain't any mistake about it. Unless *you're* gonna make a mistake, trying to hold out on me!"

"You mean to say you've arrested Mary Cosgrave?"

Afna's face wasn't blank now. It was unbelieving.

Kelly had not meant to say it, but only to imply the general idea. So far, he had not done any worse than flash a private badge. And it was true, he had picked up Mrs. Cosgrave, at the Union Station. He hadn't professed himself to be a police officer, in so many words, and he could take his oath on that.

"Guy," he said, "what about this note? I'm asking you nice for the last time. What about it?"

The bald man shrugged. "I've told you, two times over. There isn't any note here."

So! The lie direct. The guy was going to stand pat on his bluff, no matter how hard and often Kelly called him. There was nothing to do, from Kelly's standpoint, except go ahead and tip the guy's hole card by main force.

CHAPTER III

BLONDE TROUBLE



ELLY slapped the door with his right hand, jumped inside, and grabbed five fingers full of shirt front with his left.

"Now!" said Kelly, administering three or four rough jerks with the left. "Now, you—"

He was prepared for anything, from indignant protest on up to attempted gunplay. For anything except what happened.

Afna's head bobbed front and back with each jerk, then lolled side-ward, eyes closed, breath *whoof-f-fing* across relaxed lips. His knees relaxed, too. He hung like a rag doll at the end of Kelly's left arm.

"Oh, heck!" Kelly said. "I never hurt you that bad!"

The bald man was as limp as a dish-rag, though.

Kelly lowered him to the floor. Suspiciously, he patted the bald man at the three locations, shoulder and hip and side pocket, where a man would be apt to carry a gun. There was no gun. He felt of the man's wrist, rolled up an eyelid and looked into an expanse of clouded eye-white.

"Maybe he's got a bum ticker, at that," Kelly worried.

He had a ringside memory of a fight referee ramming two fingers into the solar plexus of a fighter suspected of doing a dive. Kelly stiffened two fingers, and shook his head. That wouldn't be so good, for a bum ticker.

Hesitating, he heard quick, hurrying steps outside. He half-straightened, swung around watchfully.

A girl darted across the porch to stop short under the hurricane lamp and stare wide-eyed into the hallway.

"Wh—what's happened?" she said.

Kelly peered at the nimbus of light

dropped by the light onto her wavy blond hair.

"You!" Kelly choked.

She had been looking at Afna. Now her blue glance included Kelly in the tableau, and recognition flared into fear.

She whirled and ran.

"Yeah, the same run in her socks!"

Kelly mumbled, as he stared after the silk-legged, flying vision. With a frantic leap, she sailed off the porch into the darkness.

Kelly swore.

He wasted an instant glaring at the inert Afna. To all appearances, the bald man had remained oblivious of the scene. If he was playing 'possum, he was plenty good at it. If he was really unconscious, he would probably stay that way awhile.

And—well, the blonde was important, too.

He decided to chance it. He crossed the porch in two bounding strides. The girl was a blur, almost melted into darkness, halfway down the hewn hillside steps.

"You!" Kelly bawled. "Stop!"

He bolted down the steps in pursuit, two steps at a stride. From the clatter of heels, she was doing the same. But her heels were the tricky French type. She was risking her pretty neck.

STEVE KELLY heard the shriek, the jarring fall. And then he was standing over her.

"Hey! You! You all right?"

"My ankle!" she wailed. "Ooo-oh!"

"Easy," Kelly said.

He stooped, scooped the girl into his arms. She was unexpectedly light, softly yielding. And then she wasn't yielding at all. She squirmed, writhed. Fingernails threatened a miniature blitzkrieg over his face.

His arms crushed her.

"You young devil!" he said. "You want to be dragged up the steps by the hair, or you want to come nice?"

Just as unexpectedly, the blonde subsided.

"I'll—be—nice."

Kelly hurried back up the hewn stone steps.

Afna, anyway, was still a heap on the floor. Kelly stepped over the bald man. There was a table in the hall, and one of those telephone chairs—the kind with half a back. He lowered the girl into the chair, and then stepped back.

"Ah-h!" said Kelly, his mouth dropping open.

The blonde had a gun pointed at him. It was a Bankers' Special .38. It was Kelly's own gun. She had felt it when he had crushed her to his chest, and she had just reached in, and helped herself.

"Be careful, baby!" Kelly said nervously. "That's a hair-trigger you're hanging onto!"

The bald man created a diversion by rising on one elbow and snarling at Kelly.

"Outrageous!" his thin lips rasped. "Breaking into a man's home without a warrant. Subjecting an innocent taxpayer to a third-degree! It's an outrage!"

"Ooo-hh," the girl said. "A cop!"

"I'll just take that gun, sister," Kelly said.

"Sister?" she flamed. "My name is Helene Hathaway—Miss Hathaway, to you. And have you a warrant for me?"

"It's not us he's after, Helene," Afna sighed. "It seems they've arrested Mary Cosgrave."

Her face tightened. "Arrested . . . Why, that's not possible! Why, I just saw—" she stopped, changing her face to another kind of tightness.

"Police officer?" she asked, peering over the pointed gun at Kelly. "You were *with* her. I saw that. But you stayed outside—you let her go in alone, so she couldn't have been under arrest then. You didn't even know about the murder yet! And if you didn't know, if she wasn't under ar-

rest, why were you together—riding around in a coupé instead of a police car, too?"

She had it all reasoned out. She began to laugh, shakily.

"Why, you're not a policeman at all!" she accused. "You're no more a cop than I am! You can't be!"

Kelly let the girl enjoy her moment of relieved triumph.

"Okay, so I'm not a cop." He fanned his hands out flatly. "Well, you've got me covered. There's a phone right beside your elbow. Go ahead, call somebody who is a cop, and turn me in."

HE HAD an idea this suggestion wouldn't sit so well. It didn't. Helene Hathaway reacted to the proposal with a fresh glimmer of worry in her narrowed blue eyes.

"You don't dare," Kelly said. "I might tell the cops how you ran away from the scene of that murder, how you were leaving when Mrs. Cosgrave and I got there, how you ducked into a doorway—"

"Murder!" Afna was on his feet, leaning weakly against the wall. "Murder!" he repeated. "What are you talking about?"

"Larry Sherman was killed tonight," the girl said dully.

Afna was beyond speech.

"And *she* was there," Kelly added. "And she skinned out without notifying the law there'd been a killing." He grinned at the girl. "If I'm wrong, babe, go ahead and turn me in."

The bald man gestured, "Don't be hasty, Helene." He swallowed unhappily. "Impersonating an officer is a serious matter, a penitentiary offense in fact. Now, this young man doesn't look like a criminal to me. He's rash and impetuous and violent in his methods, but I can't believe he's downright vicious. Indeed, if I'm any judge of character, we're dealing with a romantic young Robin Hood."

Kelly beamed falsely. "Gee, thanks."

Afna's smile was sorrowing. "I don't want to send you to jail, my boy, without giving you a chance to explain your actions to the satisfaction of all concerned."

Kelly quit beaming.

"Crude!" he said. "You're wondering how much I've got on *you*. Since I'm not a cop and didn't arrest Mrs. Cosgrave, you want to find out how I know about that note she left under your door."

Helene Hathaway's blond head jerked up.

"Note? What note?"

"I've told him three times," Afna said stiffly, "that there wasn't any."

Kelly laughed.

"Oh," the bald man said, "if she did leave a note, it must have been removed by an unknown, third party."

"Let's quit horsing around and talk turkey instead," Kelly said. He tossed the gold badge in his palm. "Private," he explained. "I'll be square with you. I had a client, but I got doublecrossed, left in the ditch. Well, if I can find some other clients in the same ditch, why shouldn't I?"

"You're trying to sell us your services?" the bald man asked.

Kelly wanted him to think so.

"Why not?" he said. "If a guy gets pushed into a gutter, and sees where there's some money floating around in that gutter, I say he's a fool if he crawls out empty-handed without anything for his trouble."

Helene Hathaway's blue eyes brewed a look of contempt for Kelly's benefit.

"The romantic Robin Hood," she said.

Kelly was glad she had the decency to feel that way about it. He didn't say so.

"Now, Miss Hathaway," he said, "we're all three in a spot where we don't want to call in the law. Why shouldn't we put our heads together, talk it over, and figure ourselves a way out of the jam?"

CHAPTER IV

ROBIN HOOD



FNA liked the idea of what Kelly proposed.

"Suppose we sit down and have a drink on it, at least," he suggested.

He led the way into the comfortably furnished den

at the end of the hall. Unstopping a decanter, he said:

"Sherry? I don't use hard liquor—doctor's orders. I believe there's Scotch in the pantry, if you prefer."

Kelly said sherry was fine. The girl shook her blond head.

"Nothing," she said.

Afna poured two sherries.

"By the way, we haven't the pleasure, young man," he said, with a rising inflection.

"Steve Kelly. I'm licensed, You can look it up in the classified."

"All right, Kelly. What's your proposition?"

"Financial," snapped Kelly.

"Yes, but what?"

Kelly said it depended. He said you wouldn't expect a man to bid on a bridge before he knew whether he had to span Mud Creek or the Mississippi.

"I've got to know what we're up against," he declared.

The bald man sipped his sherry, watching Kelly warily.

"You mean to say Mrs. Cosgrave didn't tell you about the affair?" He was suspicious.

"Who said Mrs. Cosgrave hired me?" Kelly demanded.

"Well, I gathered it."

"I'll do the gathering," Kelly said.

He waved his glass. Sherry flew, and the blond girl threw up her hands, her ten fingers outspread.

Kelly grabbed the gun out of her lap and grinned.

"I told you my client doublecrossed me," he said, as if nothing had happened. "Why should I believe anything I've been told so far? I'd rather have it straight from the horse's mouth."

"Robin Hood," the girl said scornfully, dabbing at wine on her shoulder.

"No, he's all right, Helene," the bald man said. "He's smart, and he gets results. You'd better tell him the story, whatever happened tonight."

She shook her head. "Nothing happened. I found the door partly open—and Larry lay inside, dead."

"But why'd you go there?" Kelly questioned.

"He asked me to. It was business, about his aunt's estate."

"Tell me about that."

"You know about that," she said, "if you know anything at all."

"Go ahead, tell it, and let me check against what I already know." He looked wise. "It's the little, insignificant details that detectives go by."

"Well, you must know I worked for Ada Sherman," the girl said impatiently.

"Pretend that I don't know a thing," said Kelly. "Tell it in your own way right from the beginning and we'll get along faster."

"All right! I was Miss Sherman's companion. That means running her errands, reading to her, listening to her. It wasn't an unusual arrangement. Lots of lonely old ladies hire companions, and lots of girls are glad to get jobs like that. I was glad, because I didn't have the training to get a decent office job, and it was pleasanter than clerking in a department store."

Steve Kelly nodded. He was listening carefully.

"Uh-huh," he said. "Well—go on."

"Well, Larry is—was—Miss Sherman's nephew. They didn't get on too well, but he expected to inherit her

money. He was the only relative, the only person she had to leave it to."

"Yep."

"He expected to inherit it pretty soon, too," the girl said. "His aunt was in bad health. About six months ago, her health became so bad that the doctor put her in the charge of a practical nurse. That's where Mary Cosgrave comes into the picture, and where I step out."

"There wasn't any question about Miss Hathaway's services," Afna said. "Ada didn't need both a nurse and a companion, was all."

"She needed more than a nurse," the girl said. "In less than a month, she was in the hospital. They operated, unsuccessfully. She died, and then it came out that she hadn't left her money to Larry at all."

"She'd had me draw up a new will," the bald man interrupted, "leaving the estate to the American Emergency Roll Call."

Kelly nodded. This placed Afna. The bald man was the family lawyer.

"Go on," Kelly said.

"Why, that's all," Helene Hathaway said. "Larry wanted to break the will, of course. It was made only three weeks before his aunt's death, and he hoped to prove she wasn't of sound mind at the time."

"Well, was she?"

"She was mentally okay when I worked for her," the girl said. "But there was something else. In all that time, living with her day in and day out, listening to her hour after hour, I never heard her mention the American Emergency Roll Call. I handled her correspondence, and she never wrote any letters to them, or got any. It seems funny, doesn't it, that she should suddenly decide to leave her entire fortune to them?"

"Her interest *was* sudden," Afna murmured. "She got interested in some of their literature. She had several talks with the organizer, Fred Mitchell, and became an enthusiastic

convert. In these troubled times, she wanted to devote her money to a patriotic purpose, rather than give a hundred thousand dollars to a play-boy like Larry."

"Don't look at me." The girl shrugged. "It was Larry Sherman's quarrel, not mine. He wanted me to come to his apartment, meet his lawyer, and make out an affidavit."

"Why not his lawyer's office?" Kelly asked.

"I'm working, and it wouldn't be easy for me to get off during business hours."

"Okay, okay. That brings you down to the kill, and why you lammed out of there."

"For Pete's sake," the girl said. "I was only thinking of my job. I'm teaching elocution in a private, girls' school out in Westwood now. It's one of those jobs that even going to a man's apartment would be fatal, let alone being involved in a murder. Besides, why should I be involved? Larry's lawyer was due there any minute. He'd find the body. There was absolutely no need for me to be the target for all the publicity."

KELLY thought this over.

"But suppose his lawyer names you to the law. Where are you then?"

"I know. That's why I came here."

Afna stared. "Here?"

"Well, I wasn't at the school. I had to be somewhere. I could say I came here first, intending to ask your advice about the whole thing, because you were Ada Sherman's lawyer and personal friend. I wanted an alibi, that was it."

The bald man nodded. "I see. I'm a married man, and you'd naturally not know my wife was out to a movie. I think you can believe her, Kelly. I'd say it was logical, that is, in terms of feminine logic."

Kelly shrugged.

"I don't care about her logic," said Kelly. "I'm more interested in her legs."

The blonde gave him a frozen look. "The left one, the one with the run," Kelly said. "How'd that happen?"

She stretched out her left foot, turned the shapely calf, looked.

"Why, when I fell, of course," she said matter-of-factly.

Mechanically, she moistened a fingertip to touch the snapped threads.

"No, it was like that when you came out of Larry Sherman's apartment," Kelly said.

Panic brimmed in her eyes.

"Are you sure?" she faltered. "Come to think of it, I did—I thought—but I was so upset! O-o-oh!"

She was already running—hobbling, rather—toward the front hall.

"Stop!" Kelly said. "Where do you think you're going?"

Lame ankle or no lame ankle, she dived down the hall toward the front door.

"Excuse me, while we go out and come in again," Kelly told Afna.

She had barely reached the porch when Kelly got a hand on her shoulder. In the darkness, she spun around; sobbing, flailing wildly.

Kelly begged, "Now, listen, ple—"

It was a clean shot to the jaw. It felt like a mule's kick. It bomb-shelled Kelly's brain into blackout oblivion.

He careened back crazily, skewering and slueing through the hall, knocking over the telephone stand's chair—out blooey, out cold. . . .

He awoke to hear Afna chirruping happily:

"The luck! The incredible luck!"

Kelly sat stupidly feeling of his jaw. He moved the jaw from side to side.

"What?" he mumbled. "What incredible luck?"

"Why, you slipped—on the rug—and *this* was under the rug all the time!" the bald man said. He waved a torn edged rectangle of paper. "The note you wanted!"

"That was no slip," Kelly growled.

"Oh, I'm sure it was. It's a waxed floor. We've had accidents before."

KELLY took his hand away from his jaw. The hand was red. Blood seeped from the bruised pulp of a puffed lip.

"I got socked."

"You mean Helene—"

"No, I don't mean Helene. Ten of her couldn't hit me that hard." Kelly fumbled for a handkerchief, and then wiped red from his mouth into it. "A guy, and I bet he had a sap."

"A guy?" said Afna, shocked. "You are sure?"

"Well, I didn't exactly see. It was dark." Kelly pounded his left fist on the floor. "Hey, that proves it! Dark! He had turned the porch light off, whoever he was!"

"But the sap?"

"Slang," Kelly said. "From when the yard bulls used to ride herd on 'boes with sapling clubs—saps, for short. Oh, the devil with it!" He climbed to his feet. "Let's see Mary Cosgrave's note, anyhow."

The note was brief. It said:

Sorry I missed you but will try the office tomorrow. Larry has been after me again. He offered me \$1,000 but I won't commit perjury. Will tell you all tomorrow.
Yours,

Mary Cosgrave.

"Do you know what it means?" Kelly asked.

The bald lawyer opined that it was simple.

"Mrs. Cosgrave dropped out of sight after Ada Sherman's death," he said. "Obviously, Larry traced her. He wanted her to swear that Ida was of unsound and infirm mind. She refused to be bribed, that is all."

"Yeah," said Kelly.

He was reflecting that probably all he had to do was turn this note over to the Homicide Squad. It, plus some fine and fancy talk, would square him with John Law. But the hurtful ache of his jaw argued otherwise. He didn't

like being pushed around. It made him resentful, and provided a personal interest in the case.

Besides—well, it might not be so simple, at that. Larry Sherman was dead, he reflected dourly. Maybe the guy really had something, enough to threaten that will. A hundred thousand bucks looked to Kelly like a nice juicy motive for murder.

He stroked his jaw tenderly.

"What was the name of that organizer? Fred Mitchell? It might be an idea to look *him* up, huh?"

"Are you asking me?" Afna asked. He wagged his bald head. "Blast it, Kelly, finding this note changes matters. It clears me, absolutely. There's no reason now why I should be your client. I'm not interested in your plans. In fact, I'd just as soon you didn't tell me what your plans are."

Having disclaimed responsibility, he smiled.

"Mitchell has an office in the Guardian Building," he blandly informed. "At night, naturally, the office won't be open. You might try the Vista-view Hotel. I believe he lives there. But don't send me a bill for your services, because I won't pay it."

CHAPTER V

A HUNDRED, PER GENERAL



STEVE KELLY drove to the Guardian Building first. Like most metropolitan office buildings, this one was open nights. But there was a guard in the lobby, and you were supposed to sign the ledger.

He signed with a flourish, "Steve Kelly." The lobby bulletin board said:

AMERICAN EMERGENCY
ROLL CALL—303

The suite was darkened, locked.

But like most doors subjected to the California style climate, the one to this Suite 303 didn't fit too snugly.

Kelly's professional equipment included a six-inch flexible celluloid rule. He had forced more than one lock with this tool, and this door was as easy as any he had ever tackled.

The office consisted of a narrow anteroom, walled off from a receptionist's desk, and then an inner office. He took the receptionist's desk first. Some stenographers were a lot more careless about tell-tale details than their employers. At five o'clock, they just pulled the hoods over their machines and departed. This girl had left an upper desk drawer stacked with envelopes she had been addressing at quitting time.

Kelly thumbed the stack, noting the preponderance of Grade A, Beverly Hills street numbers. He peered curiously at one of the folded enclosures.

This was a proof sheet, reprinting an editorial excerpted from a New York daily. It was a fighting, ringing, anti-Nazi editorial. A boxed square at the foot of the page explained:

Won't you help the American Emergency Roll Call distribute one million copies of this and similar Patriotic Messages to the workers of Los Angeles? If you believe in Education for Americanism, now is the time to Show Your Colors! Help wage War on Foreign Isms! Shoulder Arms against Disloyal Propaganda! Clip and return this coupon with your contribution at once!

(Check Which)

Enclosed is \$1.00. Sign me up as a first-class private in the Roll Call.

Enclosed is \$5.00. I want to be a captain in the fight!

Enclosed is \$100.00. I'll be a general!

That was not the pay-off. The pay-off came when Kelly delved into the mail basket. Apparently Fred Mitchell hadn't been in the office that afternoon, and this was a piece of mail the girl was saving for his attention in the morning.

It was a job printer's bill for one month's work, totaling \$55.05.

"One million copies, huh?" Kelly said.

He felt happy. His suspicions were being verified. A grin smarted on his bruised lips as he pushed the printer's bill into the same pocket with Mary Cosgrave's note. . . .

The Vistaview was residential, de luxely so. It catered to the cream, or tried to.

"Only," Kelly reflected, "cream isn't the only thing that comes to the top. Scum does, too."

He mumbled his name into the lobby phone.

"I'm a reporter from the *Times*. I'm supposed to get a story from you about the Roll Call."

Fred Mitchell was cordial. "Come right up."

MITCHELL had a suite that looked like a movie set. It also looked kind of like a Turkish boudoir, with its abundant cushions and its nude statuery. Mitchell himself was two hundred pounds of hypnotic salesmanship, equipped with box-car shoulders, beaming baby-blue eyes, and an ebullient, sweat-box manner.

He grabbed Kelly's hand and said:

"You'll want to get the idea behind the American Emergency Rollcall. It's old-fashioned patriotism, that's the idea! We're against the Nazis and the Japs and their fifth column treachery! We're against disloyalty and sabotage and every other un-American activity!"

"That's swell," Kelly said. "What are you doing about it?"

"Our work is educational and inspirational," Mitchell said. "We're educating and inspiring the common man to think and work and sacrifice for his country. We're fighting fire with fire—lighting a backfire of American truth to combat the flames of evil foreign propaganda."

"Yeah. How?"

Mitchell said the plan was to broad-

cast the living thoughts of today.

"We take the living, vital editorials from newspapers all over the country," he explained. "The things the average man would never see at all. Our plan is to reproduce those patriotic messages by the millions and distribute them in the homes and shops and factories of California."

"That's a swell idea," Kelly agreed.

"How many million copies have you printed and distributed so far?"

"We're just getting started, setting up an organization," Mitchell gestured. "The thing has tremendous scope. Nobody yet realizes the full possibilities—"

Kelly grinned.

"Isn't it a fact that you haven't got around to distributing any of those copies yet?" he asked.

"We've started in a small way," the big man hedged.

"Isn't it another fact," Kelly asked, "that your organization consists of yourself and one office girl?"

"I said we were just getting started," Mitchell wasn't so breezy now, not quite so confident.

"Hasn't it been almost five months since Ada Sherman left you a hundred grand?" Kelly asked.

"I—we haven't got the money yet."

"Well, you've got other money. You've been sitting in your office, mailing out literature to a selected sucker list, and enlisting privates and captains and generals at from a dollar to a hundred dollars the throw. And last month your printer's bill came to fifty-five dollars and five cents, just about the price of the sucker literature." Kelly laughed bitterly. "That's what tipped me off to the racket, big boy."

Mitchell bristled, narrowed his eyes.

"You question my sincerity?" He was highly insulted. "My Americanism?"

"Is that what you call it?" Kelly asked. "This gag of waving the flag with one hand, while you hold out a

tin cup in the other for the gullible public to drop its money in?"

Kelly wasn't laughing now.

"You cheap snide racketeer, cashing in on decent people's patriotism! Hijacking the dollars they'd otherwise give to the U. S. O. or invest in War Savings Bonds! You're so crawling low"—Kelly was sneering—"that you'd need a stepladder to climb on a bug's back!"

MITCHELL took the lacing in gracefully, sulking silence.

"Apparently Larry Sherman was getting wise to your racket," Kelly said. "Is that why you killed him tonight?"

This seemed to press the button. Mitchell reacted as if to the touch of a high voltage wire. He blazed up.

"You say—I—killed . . . Why, by—"

"Surprised?" Kelly gibed.

The big man threw his punch. Kelly side-stepped, the blow grazing his haircut as he retreated. Kelly waited on his toes, sparring with menacing right fisted gestures. Mitchell came in a headlong snarling rush. A straight left suddenly shot out of the sparring stance, and it wasn't a jab. It was Kelly's south-paw, Sunday wallop.

Fred Mitchell catapulted backward, upsetting a coffee table and two chunks of statuary before he landed on the pillow-nested divan. He was not the first guy who had made the mistake of concentrating on Kelly's right.

Kelly bent over him. "Now, you—"

But Mitchell was out. And Kelly nearly choked. A book had tumbled out of concealment behind the pillows. The "American Doctor's Odyssey."

Kelly pawed it open, to the missing front fly-page. He snatched the note from his pocket, tried to fit the torn edges. He stared savagely at the result—or lack of result. Because there wasn't any fit at all.

For a big book, this one was

queerly light. Kelly broke it open, found that most of the middle had been hollowed with a razor blade. A green stamp pasted inside the back cover said:

Hollypark Lend Library
Hollypark Hotel, Hollywood

The back fly-page was penciled with two columns of dates, the latest being yesterday.

"She-phony!" said Kelly wrathfully.

He barged through the suite, the over-decorated bedroom, the pretty-pink bathroom. He even investigated a clothes closet that held nothing more than Mitchell's de luxe wardrobe.

He emerged, growling. "Where's the dame gone to?"

The imitation patriot on the divan was nursing his chin.

"I wish I knew!"

The fight had been taken out of him. His manner indicated a heart-sick, belly-aching melancholy.

"You weren't kidding—about Larry Sherman?" he asked dolorously.

Kelly put the book under his arm and stalked out, slamming the door behind him.

He drove like a house afire to the Hollypark. In the lend library off its lobby, a kittenish female identified the volume.

"It was taken out by—let's see. By Mrs. Cosgrave."

"I'll return it to her," offered Steve Kelly. "Maybe she hasn't finished reading it."

The desk clerk told him she was in Room 611.

"You're just in time," he said. "She's checking out."

Kelly waited in front of the elevator. When Mary Cosgrave stepped out, he took her arm.

"Going my way?" Kelly asked.

She looked like a woman who had just reached into the medicine cabinet and taken poison by mistake.

"Okay, boy," Kelly said to the bell-

hop. "You can put her bags in my car out front. Huh, Mary?"

She nodded mutely. She couldn't do anything else.

In the coupé, Kelly said, "I'll take this."

He unsnapped the bulging handbag. He clucked over the efficiently unpretty .25 automatic.

"This is what you had in your book?"

No answer.

Kelly pried into the inner purse. She had close to five hundred dollars there, and not in the form of travelers' checks."

"Mitchell's ante?" he surmised.

She didn't say a word. This time, she didn't even betray anxiety about Kelly's driving. She had too much else on her mind, undoubtedly.

CHAPTER VI

THE WRONG WILL



"T'S about time," asserted Detective-lieutenant Smithers.

He was a Homicide officer, and the city had not hired him to help old ladies across the street, and he could be tough on occasion. He was feeling pretty good right

now, though.

"You could get your fingers knocked off, Kelly, sticking them into a murder," he said. "But after all, you brung in a witness. It can ride, seeing we got the case cold."

"How cold?" Kelly asked.

"On ice," Smithers said.

He led the way through Larry Sherman's apartment.

"It started here in the kitchenette, see? Glasses knocked over, chair upset, liquor spilled. They must've been mixing a drink when the argument started. They wrestled around in here, until finally they wound up in the other room. She socked him with

the book-end, and then used the knife, which she must have grabbed while she was in the kitchen."

"You mean Helene Hathaway," said Kelly.

"Why, sure. You overlooked something, guy." Smithers stopped in the hallway connecting the kitchenette-dinette with the front of the apartment. He aimed his finger at the little door under the phone niche. "She run into this and snagged her stocking. See?"

Kelly examined the door's edge. There was a small sliver, and a silky wisp of thread.

"Later on," Smithers said, "she came back. I guess she noticed the run in her sock, saw the thread was torn, and figured she might maybe get rid of that evidence before the cops showed. She was out in the courtyard, trying to peek in the window, when we grabbed her."

They returned to the front of the apartment. A bluecoat stood watch over Helene Hathaway who was looking small and scared in an armchair. The same officer had his eye on Mary Cosgrave. A fat civilian in the hallway watched all of them.

"Miss Hathaway has explained about her stocking, Lieutenant," the man in the hall interjected.

"Who's the fatty?" Kelly asked.

"Sherman's lawyer. He knows her explanation don't amount to a hoot. She says when she found this body, she used the telephone to call up a guy named Afna."

"You're checking it?"

"Yeah. Bringing the guy in. Here he comes now."

Afna entered, escorted by a plainclothes man. This made the room so crowded it hardly left room for the corpse.

Smithers asked him, how about it?

"Yes, Miss Hathaway called me," Afna said. "Wanted to know if it'd be all right for her to see me tonight."

"Well, naturally," Smithers said. "After she killed Sherman, she had

to hunt herself some kind of an alibi." He wagged his head. "She couldn't rush out to Laurel Canyon, unless she knew for sure the guy was at home."

"You'd just got home?" Kelly asked the bald lawyer.

"I'd been out a few minutes, driving my wife to a movie," Afna said. "When I have work, important cases to prepare, she leaves me to a quiet house. Not that it was so quiet to-night!"

"Isn't it a fact that Mary Cosgrave was your important case?" Kelly asked. "She'd phoned she was coming to have a show-down with you, and so you invented an excuse to get rid of your wife for the evening?"

The bald man stared. "Show-down? But you saw her note. You know that's not true."

KELLY pulled the note from his pocket.

"You wrote this?" he asked Mary Cosgrave.

She hesitated.

Kelly said, "Now, before you lie yourself any deeper into this!" He flipped open the front cover of the "Odyssey." "I know what your message was. Writing it on the porch, using the book for a rest, your pencil pressed down hard enough to make an impression on the page under the one you tore out."

Somebody kicked the bridge lamp cord, plunged the room into darkness. There was a flash, a roar, the smell of drifting cordite. Hands clawed at Kelly, tried to tear the volume out of his hands.

A switch clicked. The fatty in the hall had reached in, thumbed on the chandelier overhead. Everybody saw Afna frantically trying to tear the book away from Kelly.

"Him?" yelled Smithers.

"Ice cold," Kelly said, and pushed Afna into a chair.

"But he hasn't got a gun, has he?"

"That was me," the plainclothes escort said. "I dragged out my rod

when the lights faded. He musta jiggled my hand. Lucky I only shot a hole in the ceiling, huh?"

Kelly stared at Mary Cosgrave.

"You see how it is? The guy's fool move is a dead giveaway. Are you figuring on going down with *his* ship?"

She was not.

"I'll tell you all I know," she said. "It's true Ada Sherman made a new will before she died. She was going to give Larry the money in a trust fund annuity instead of outright. Afna drew up the papers. Well, her eyesight wasn't so good, and she couldn't read without one of those big reading glasses. After she had read the new will, he managed to knock the glass on the floor and step on it. I didn't realize it at the time, but later on I knew he must have switched the papers. She signed the wrong will, was what happened."

Afna cursed.

Grinning at him, Kelly said: "A pretty thing. You knew Mitchell was a phoney, of course. What was the deal, that he'd kick back half of the hundred grand to you?"

"Go to the devil!" the bald man snarled.

Smithers had picked up the book, was holding it this way and that to the light.

"I can't make out nothing here!"

"Neither could I," Kelly said cheerfully, "but it was a swell idea, and anyway I can tell you how Nurse Cosgrave came back into the picture. She had left town after Ada Sherman's death, but Larry's lawyer traced her. Instead of admitting what she knew, she decided to try and horn in for a cut of the hundred grand. But she was afraid to hijack Afna, even with a gun hidden inside a book where she could get at it fast.

"She thought, though, he wouldn't dare make any trouble if she brought an armed bodyguard along. She went to the Union Station, played the scared spinster, and dragged me in

for an accomplice—planning to park me out on the porch while she propositioned the guy.

"Well, Afna wasn't home. He had given her the run-around, so she scratched out an angry note threatening to spill the works to Larry. That probably gave her the idea of going to Larry and finding out what price he would pay. But she found Larry dead. She had to work fast, because his death eliminated the only party who would be interested in bidding against Afna for her information.

"She went to the Vistaview, talked to Fred Mitchell, and raised five hundred dollars on her promise to drop out of sight. The fact that Mitchell gave her the five hundred proves that he didn't yet know about the murder. Finally, she was cagey enough to keep a gun in her hand during the interview, which explains how she forgot and left the book there."

ALL of them were staring at him, as he finally paused.

"There's just one thing," Helene Hathaway sighed. "This fight here, before Larry was killed. His heart, I mean."

"There's nothing wrong with Afna's heart except the black murder in it," Kelly said. "He pulled that bum heart gag so nobody would suspect he'd killed Larry Sherman in a hand-to-hand fight."

"There didn't have to be any fight," said Smithers. "He could have busted things up after he killed Sherman."

Kelly peered at Mary Cosgrave. "Did you talk to Larry tonight on the filling station phone, where you got his address?"

"I didn't have to. I got a busy signal, so I knew he was here."

Kelly swung to Smithers. "That's the one angle that had me dizzy. How

could Afna have killed Larry Sherman after that phone call, and still got home by the time Helene called him from here? He didn't have to, see? Because the busy signal she heard was Helene's call.

"There you've got it. The guy killed Larry right after he had taken his wife out to the movies. It wasn't just because of Cosgrave, either. It was because of Miss Hathaway, and Larry's lawyer, and Larry investigating the Roll Call racket. It meant disbarment and a penitentiary sentence for him if they put enough heat on Mitchell to make Mitchell talk. He thought he could strike one blow—eliminate Larry, and after that the will wouldn't be contested at all."

Helene Hathaway was puzzled.

"Wait. Who was the man on the porch?"

"You didn't see?"

"It was dark, and I ran for my life. I thought maybe I could get that bit of stocking thread before the police came. I didn't want to be convicted of murder!"

"It was Afna, himself," Kelly said. "He jumped up behind us, and then grabbed a weapon—the wine decanter, most likely. There would be a switch by the French window to control the porch light. He simply stepped out through that window, and took advantage of the darkness to knock me out. He needed time to forge a phoney note, was why."

Detective - lieutenant Smithers grated his teeth.

"Will you quit spiling?" he grumbled. "So I can ask some questions, like I'm paid to do?"

"Reminds me," Kelly said. He swiveled to the Cosgrave woman, hand out and palm up. "A fin, lady! You still owe me five dollars for this night's work. Boy, am I getting rich hand over fist? Yeah—oh, yeah!"

●

Next Issue: DEATH TAKES NO HOLIDAY, A Gripping Complete Novelet by W. T. BALLARD, and Many Other Thrillers!

BONER

By FREDRIC BROWN

A loyal American has the last laugh on a threatening Nazi!

S EVEN hundred and thirty-four Canal Street, where the call had come from, was a pleasant little cottage in a quiet neighborhood. Carl Heofener, the guy who had called us, turned out to be just as I had pictured him when he had told me his story over the phone.

About fifty-five; slow-moving and slow-talking, but still husky; hair thin on top and gray at the temples; quiet, unexcitable gray eyes. A typical German, but not the kind that goes for Bunds.

"Yes," I told him, "I'm from the F.B.I. So is the gentleman with me. He's Tom Murdock. You said this German agent approached you to let him into the factory while you're on duty as watchman? And with the relatives-in-Germany threat to hold over you if you refused?"

Heofener nodded. "Like I told you, I stalled him. He'll be here any minute. You can listen in, so you get evidence, and then arrest him."

"Tom," I said, "you keep watch at the window. Mr. Heofener, you were born in Germany, I understand, but you're a citizen. And you're watchman at the Nordyke plant?"

"Yes. I worked there twenty years. I've been a citizen for a lot longer than that. My boss, he knows I'm a good American, so even after they changed over to parts for the new type anti-tank guns, he kept me on."

"And you have relatives living in Germany?"

"One. A cousin. He—"

"Don't worry, Heofener," I said. "If this agent comes here, we'll see



HERR SCHMIDT

he doesn't get word to anybody. That you gave him away I mean. We'll keep the lid on him tight. Did he say when he wants you to let him in the Nordyke plant?"

"I think tonight. I'll ask him. Let us talk long enough so you can get evidence from what he says."

"There's a guy walking by on the other side of the street, looking at the house," Tom Murdock's voice cut in. "Yeah, he's crossing over this way. He can't see me through this curtain."

"In here," said Heofener quickly, yanking open the door of a coat closet.

"You take it, Tom," I said, "I'll take behind the davenport. We'll have him bracketed if he—"

The doorbell rang once, shrilly, and I got my head down out of sight. Heofener's footsteps going to the door, and the footsteps of two men returning.

"Herr Heofener, you have decided to agree?" It was more of a statement than a question.

Heofener played his part well. Pretending to hesitate because he was afraid of consequences if caught, he got the agent to admit that he was working alone and would, himself, be

the one Heofener was to admit to the plant.

"Of course I work alone, *Herr* Heofener. Except sometimes with the assistance of others like yourselves. . . . My name? You may call me Schmidt."

"And if I refuse, *Herr* Schmidt?" Heofener asked.

"Bah! I told you that. If you go to the police, your cousin back in *der Vaterland* will die. Very unpleasantly, *Herr* Heofener. They will not shoot him. He will die of natural causes in a concentration camp. You appreciate the difference."

"Yes. But—"

"Another thing, *mein freund*. My message has already gone through. People skilled in that sort of thing will trace down your relative. He will not be arrested if I so order. He will be arrested if I *do not* report otherwise. You understand?"

Behind the davenport, I cursed silently to myself. Schmidt would have thought of that. Probably he was telling the truth. There was no reason why he should not have done what he said. And it meant that—

"You see what will happen if you attempt to trap me," he said. "I rely on you, *Herr* Heofener."

He turned to go. It was a tough break for Heofener, but we had to take the agent. Schmidt was a man we were after, and wanted badly.

I had him placed now, and he'd been telling the truth about his working alone. That was why we hadn't been able to catch up with him before.

I stood up. Schmidt had turned in the doorway and had one arm raised in the Nazi salute. His face went white when he saw me and the gun in my hand, and his other arm went up to join the one already raised.

Tom Murdock came out of the closet. He went behind Schmidt and relieved him of the Luger he hadn't dared reach for. And Murdock put the cuffs on the German agent.

I turned to Heofener. He was laughing, quietly.

"Let me tell it now," he said. "I want to watch his face."

I stared at him blankly. "Tell what?"

He grinned like a cat full of canary.

"What's going to happen when they get Schmidt's message and try to follow through. When they find out I changed my name because—well, I wasn't proud of it any more.

"Himmler would have been translated into English as Heavenman. That sounded silly so I translated it into Anglo-Saxon as Heofener. And I'd like to be around when the Gestapo gets their agent's order to liquidate my cousin Heinrich—their chief!"



*Two American Soldiers Run into a Baffling Death
Mystery—and Face Desperate Perils in a
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IN

MURDER ON FURLOUGH

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By MARVIN RYERSON

Coming in the Next Issue



Gertie pounded LaTour until he was as limp as a rug

HOMICIDE SQUAB

By JOE ARCHIBALD

There's plenty popping when Detective Willie Klump's girl friend Gertie sails into a mystery case to flabbergast Satchelfoot Kelly!

THE cops found Mischa Misco, male member of the famous bright-spot dance team of Volga and Misco, twelve hours after a criminal character had inserted the business end of an ice-pick between two of his ribs, too close to his aorta. They knew he had been

defunct that long because the cadaver connoisseur had told them so.

Aloysius "Satchelfoot" Kelly, a lot of detectives from downtown, in bulk if nothing more, sat on a luxurious divan and studied the remains. Kelly had not a thing to go on thus far.

One of his big hands dug down be-

tween the arm of the divan and the big cushion upon which he sat, for it was a habit of Satchelfoot's to explore all couches or divans upon which he chanced to rest. They gave up loose change in most instances. He guessed this. Miscu had entertained citizens with plenty of scratch to lose out of their pockets.

Kelly's fingers contacted something flat and round. He drew out the treasure and saw that it was a doll's compact and on it there was a big V made by little green stones.

"Ah-hah!" Satchelfoot said. "This does not mean V for Victory. Volga! We're gettin' somewheres now, boys. Go out and pick up this foreigner an' bring her here. We will use persycology on her when she sits an' looks at the stiff. Is that dead wagon here?"

No sooner had Kelly spoken when the crew of the morgue pick-up truck entered and they carried a bassinet. Behind them was a citizen who looked like a fugitive from an old-fashioned husking bee and the sight of him lifted Satchelfoot off the divan much quicker than if the arrival had been a King cobra.

"Where did you find that?" Kelly roared at a morgue flunky. "Willie, only you would thumb a ride in a dead wagon. You get out of here!"

"I am not in the way," William Klump said. "After all I am a detective, too. I was at the morgue studying up on rigor mortises when they got the phone call, so I just come along. Who did it, Satchelfoot?"

WILLIE KLUMP had once been a detective downtown but the big town's manhunting factory had not appreciated Willie's unorthodox methods of apprehending those who broke the laws. Willie had gone out and had set himself up in a two-by-four office on which he had painted:

THE HAWKEYE DETECTIVE
AGENCY, UNINC
WILLIAM KLUMP, President

Willie had a face as naive as the farmer's daughter of fiction. His blue serge suit looked as if he was always smuggling turnips in it and his shoes were definitely on the yellow side like the skins of dried lemons. If Willie resembled a detective, then the witch in Snow White used to be a stand-in for Juliet.

Miraculously enough, William Klump had solved a few cases that had baffled the best brains on Center Street. And it was rumored about in gossip columns that Ripley had scouts out watching the president of the Hawkeye.

"You are just wastin' your time," Satchelfoot said. "This thing won't fool me, Willie. You will see the guilty character as soon as we can git her here."

In less than half an hour, two of Kelly's men ushered a delectable member of the distaff side into the apartment where Mischa was acting as a rug. Volga shrieked twice and covered her pan with her hands and it was a pan that should never be covered from public view. She had eyes the color of blackberry brandy and a pair of lips like Colbert's. Her hair streamed down from under a little scarlet skypiece and it was as black as Pittsburgh at midnight.

"Oh, eet ees tarrible," Volga squeaked, and peeked at the corpse between her splayed fingers. "Poor Mischa! You fin' out who does thees awful t'eeng?"

"I dunno," Kelly said. "I got a compact here an' it has a V on it, sister. An' I bet it wa'n't left here by Veronica Lake. Jus' think who would have the initial V, kiddo."

"Why, eet ees belong to me, yes," Volga said. "I lost eet las' time I veesit Mischa. We are jus' like brother an' sister, yes. Often I come to have ze leetle dreenc with Mischa after a vary hard day. Eet ees nyatting to mak' you theenk I keel him, no!"

"She has got somethin' there,"

Willie piped up. "I been readin' about them two in the papers an' Gertie keeps after me to hire a dress suit so's to take her to see them in person. You see how much dough I saved, Kelly? Here I meet them more than in person only Mischa is no shape to give me his autograft. Why should Volga knock off Mischa as it is like killin' one half of the goose that helps to lay gold eggs."

"Yes," Volga said. "I would not be such a blockhead like zat!" Volga tossed her head at Satchelfoot. "Thees man he look vary dumb," she said to Satchelfoot, "but he has more brains as you."

"Don't get smart," Kelly snapped. "So he was a brother to you, huh? Maybe you didn't like that, sister. So you found out he was makin' a play for some other babe. Or you was makin' goo-goo eyes at another patsy and didn't want to pay out fifty grand in order to put the ball and chain on the twerp. I'm right one way or the other."

"When there is three-way thinkin', Satchelfoot," Willie sniffed, "then you might be right sometimes."

SATCHELFOOT looked as if apoplexy would be partial recovery from what ailed him.

"I'll take one more wise-crack from you, Banjo-eyes," he howled. "Then I'll toss you out into the alley. Surprised to know about your contract, hah?" he threw at Volga who had twitched as if something had taken a nip out of a shapely calf when Kelly had talked about the fifty grand. "I read some myself."

"Joe Miller's book and the Phantom Fiend Comics," Willie said. "What could you get out of—"

"Managers are smart babies," Kelly went on to Volga. "He figured either you or Mischa would fall for weddin' bells and he protected himself. It costs dough to run a Vermilion room. I figure on questionin' people in the Vermilion room, too,

as always when a dame has your looks and success, there is at least two other cookies around who would cut her throat. So if you got secrets, Volga, spill 'em now."

"At times," Willie Klump said, "you amaze me, Satchelfoot. I should observe you more."

"Aw, you're just flatterin' me, Willie."

"You know averyt'ing, hah?" Volga said. "Sure, I say jus' the other day maybe I have to cut Mischa's throat to save me feefty t'ousand dollars. I am keedin' is all. The contract is not for our manager but to protect ourselves, me an' Mischa."

"Just you now," Willie said. "Why don't you have the remains removed, Kelly? It is very unpleasant holding a coffee clutch with a corpse."

"Yes," Volga said, and dabbed at her pretty glims. "Why don't you?"

"So you threatened to kill Mischa?" Kelly yelled. "In front of witnesses, too. What chance you think you got now, sister?"

"Oh look, Satchelfoot," Willie snorted. "I can count twenty times when you threatened to murder me in public and you was kiddin' too."

"So you think so?" the slewfoot snarled. "You are so naive, Willie. Well, Volga, there is no use of you trying to skip town as I have put a guard around the dump where you live and they tell me your flat is full of trunks filled with clothes and furs. I guess you wouldn't scam and leave all that stuff. An' run away from a four hundred a week job. So you can go on your way but don't think you are not a suspect. I can pick you up easy."

Willie Klump almost fainted.

"Satchelfoot, you mean she is to go at liberty like anybody?" Willie gulped. "Why you have the motive and she almost confessed. The taxpayers won't like this."

"I know what I am doin'," Kelly said. "Well, clear the joint, boys."

"I go," Volga said. "You are wan

beeg steef, Satchelfeets. Ha, eet ees fonny. Such feets should be on clowns. I like Meester Klomp an' eef I have any detective business sometimes, I look you op."

"My card," Willie said with a bow that cost him one suspender button.

WILLIE went uptown to keep a luncheon date with Gertie Mudgett. Satchelfoot Kelly, a wry grin on his map, hied to a tavern for a ham on rye and a beer.

Kelly sat alone and juggled his thoughts. Willie Klump, he ruminated, had made a sucker out of him too many times. This time he was going to watch Willie and he had let Volga loose simply because she was the apparent assassin of Mischa Mescu. He could always nab her if he had to.

This time Aloysius Kelly was going to play Willie's game and make sure that the president of the Hawkeye did not steal another march on him. Satchelfoot had never felt better satisfied with what brains he had.

Willie found Gertie waiting in front of their favorite lunchroom on East Fiftieth, and Gertie was a little impatient until Willie told her about the murder of Mischa.

"Aw, she wouldn't rub him out," Gertie scoffed as they ankled into the gastronomic bistro. "Look how they looked into each other's eyes while they danced. They was beautiful, Willie. Let Kelly arrest her by mistake, but you lay off."

Gertie reached out with thumb and forefinger and plucked something from Willie's lapel, and it made Willie feel very nervous and abashed.

"I hate people pokin' at me in public," Willie said.

"Why, when a girl does that to a feller," Gertie said, a little huffed, "it means she kinda owns him one way or another. Pickin' lint off his collar or—"

"That's what scares me," Willie began. "I—er—mean—"

"Oh, the ol' run-around, hah?" Gertie flared up. "You tryin' to tell me I ain' good enough for you? Now look here, you—"

"I just said—"

"Oh, I ain't stupid, Willie Klump. Here I just started in at secretary school to study shorthand and tripe-writin' an' all I get for tryin' to make myself good enough for . . . I wisht that was a blond hair I plucked off you. I would smack you with the ketchup bottle. Awright, I—"

The manager had to come and placate Gertie. The upshot of it was that Gertie pushed the manager in the face and Willie asked her to be calm and it earned for Willie just what the manager got. So Willie left the restaurant and went to his office where he took a jelly doughnut from a file cabinet and then made some coffee to wash it down with.

That night, Willie read the papers and they said that Volga was being questioned about the extermination of Mischa Mescu.

There was a short biographical sketch of Mischa and it said that the Bulgarian dancer had scrambled out of Sofia three hours ahead of the Nazis as Mischa was on the side that tried to keep Hitler's rodents out of his native land.

A Gestapo agent nearly got Mischa before he hopped into the plane that took him to Athens. Mischa bribed a Nazi in Sofia and got himself a passport and that was why he happened to be in the United States instead of in a boneyard in Bulgaria. Detective Kelly admitted to the press that Volga was under suspicion.

Klump's thoughts were as elusive as many greased eels in a pool of glycerin, so every time he snagged one he had to write it down lest it never come back. They looked like this:

No. 1—Volga would have had to pay 50,000 smackeroos if she up and married some guy and left Mischa behind the eight ball. Mischa would get the 50 Gs. Or vice versa.

Volga is the type of dame who could marry any time she wanted.

No. 2—If Kelly finds who carries the torch for Volga, he will maybe solve the case. Or maybe Volga was overboard for Mischa and Mischa had his eye on another frill. There is no fury like scorning a woman. Ask Gertie. A lot of angles to this case. I should leave it alone if I wasn't so broke.

Willie went home and got a little sleep and the next morning he was back again in his cubicle wondering what was in the mail. He tossed three circulars in the basket and then centered his optics on a missive that exuded a sweetness that should have been against the law in time of war.

No doubt, Willie mused, it was from a dame. But it had been typewritten. He hastily ripped it open. It said:

Dear Mister Klomp: Maybe you are vary surprised to hear from me so soon. But I have found sometheeng in Mischa's dressing room at hotel you should look over. Also to tell you some theengs I would not tell that fresh detective, Kelly. I will meet you in office of my manager at eleven o'clock this morning. His name is Raymond LaTour and he is in room 657, Longacre Square Building. Please do come, Mr. Klomp.

Willie mopped his brow. The doll had no idea that she was getting Willie onto a spot, for it was not ethical to withhold evidence from a man like Satchelfoot Kelly. Willie realized what it would mean if Kelly got wise to such skullduggery. Willie could already smell the jute factory in a hoosegow.

"Well, maybe it is nothin'," Willie assured himself. "If I don't try, I'll never get nowheres. I wish I had my suit pressed though."

At eleven o'clock Willie was ushered into the office of the theatrical agent and he found it a quite luxurious place with stream-lining and all. Volga lolled in a big easy chair with plenty of stream-lining herself and she did not seem to mind showing everybody that she still had quite a supply of silk hosiery despite the

trouble with the Japanazis.

Raymond LaTour gave Willie a little start. The swart character was built like a gorilla and Willie wondered who had ever handed him the name of Raymond. Whoever had, Willie was sure, would have labeled an Army tank, Cecilia. Volga leaned sideward in her chair and reached up and removed a piece of foreign matter from LaTour's spiffy double-breasted coat.

"Ah, I am here," Willie said.

"Oh, yes. So glad you got my letter, Mr. Klomp," Volga said. "I have sometheeng I find in Mischa's dressing table. A threatening letter. But you read it, yes?"

The gorgeous one took a crumpled letter from her handbag and handed it to Willie. Willie eased himself to a chair and spread the thing open. The paper was smeared with dirt. The citizen who had typed it must have done so with his mittens on, Willie thought.

A GAIN the president of the Hawk-eye Detective Agency read:

My Dear Mischa: So you see I am here, no? I guess you think I get drowned on the boat, ha? You remember how it was you get to America, Mischa. It was nasty trick and now I ask you to pay, my fine friend. I come to New York in few days and I come see you. You get famous so it is easy to find you. I want twenty-five thousand the first time. It is I get it or you will die. You take your pick, Mischa.

You know.

"Ah—er—" Willie said. "He took the pick. The ice pick. Instead of blackmail, huh? When did he git this letter?"

"Maybe two weeks ago," Volga said. "Mischa tells me everytheeng. Or did. He is in fear of his vary life, my fran'. So he tall me the secret. It was his brother Serge who have all the money an' who could buy the passport. But Mischa is desperate an' he steals the money so he can come to thees contry instead. All the time he

theenks the Gestapo killed Serge."

"He was a rat," Willie sniffed.

"Maybe you t'ink so. But Mischa he is vary sorry all the time he did it. But he say Serge ees the kind of faller who never forgat an' will keel him quick if he fin' Mischa an' ask how mooch is left of his monny after. So he ask Raymond an' me to watch out for Serge as the firs' place he weel maybe com' is the Vermilion Room in the hotal. He say maybe if we talk to Serge an' mak' heem forgat murder—"

"You should of told Kelly this," Willie said severely. "I can get in trouble as—"

"I hate heem," Volga snapped. "Anyway I don' find thees latter unteel yesterday. So now I tall you even more. The man or woman who kill Mischa has the Miscu ruby ring."

"Yeah," LaTour cut in. "And Mischa's pay for the last two weeks. One thousand smackers in new hundred dollar bills. He left here with it. Nobody—I mean the cops—found it on him when they found him knocked off. Didn't that dumb flat-foot figure Mischa ought to have some hay on him?"

"That is funny, huh?" Willie said. "Well, then you think Serge showed up, huh?"

"Did he?" Volga said. "We ought to know. He blew in here jus' t'ree days ago an' he looked like a Russian Cossack loaded with vodka and bitten by wasps. He is so murderous looking, I am vary scairt. We talk to heem like brother an' seester, don't we Raymond?"

"Serge is dressed vary bad an' looks so out of place in the Vermilion Room so we have to gat heem a place to stay an' a suit to wear. We tall Serge Mischa ees vary sad an' wants to mak' up for everyt'ing. We say you go home, you bad boy, an' Mischa he weel com an' mak' everyt'eeng—er—what you call him Jake here in this contry."

"So he calmed down an' went along

quiet?" Willie asked, a little gaga with all the details.

"Yes, but wian he ees alone I bat you he starts to brood again an' gats t'inking of Mischa an' averyt'eeng. You find Serge an' search hees room an' ask heem where was he all night the night his brother was stabbed, Meester Klomp. We have the address where we put heem up."

"I went there yesterday an' this mornin'," LaTour said. "He wasn't nowheres around. I figured on getting a cop to break down the door but—"

WILLIE folded up the threatening letter and put it in his pocket.

"I wish you had told Kelly this," he groaned. "Boys, I can git in a sling holdin' evidence from downtown. I am a private dick and shouldn't monkey with first degree murders."

"Aw, who cares who grabs a killer as long as he don't get away?" LaTour sniffed and inserted a cigarette into an ivory holder. "You're smart, you'll get the credit, an' me an' Volga won't own up we helped you at all. No mug can accuse my—Volga, of stabbing people with an ice pick, Klomp."

"Why, eet ees the outrage," Volga said with plenty of pyrotechnics. "That big log!"

"Ha," Willie said. "It looks like I am lucky again. Well, I will go and look in on Sergy and see if he is home and has no alibi and has what you say he swiped from Mischa. There is a chance that he has skipped town with the dough though. Then I might have to tell Kelly myself as I have no way of extraditing criminals in my office. Well, thanks. I will do my utmost to bring the killer to justice and clear your fair name, Volga."

"Good luck, pal," LaTour said and shook hands with Willie. "Get him the address Sugar."

"You forget," Volga piped up, her eyes sizzling. "You are my manager,

no? You call me Volga, no?"

"Sorry," LaTour said. "Just forgot myself, Madame."

William Klump hurried back to his office and he felt like an embezzler packing the contents of a bank vault. Any moment Willie expected a heavy hand to gather in the slack of the seat of his pants and hang on tight. Once in the privacy of his office, Willie locked the door and closed the transom tight. He plugged up the keyhole and drew down the shade of his one window.

"Phew!" gasped Willie, and he took the two letters he had in his possession and thrust them through a hole in the lining of his blue serge coat.

"Satchelfoot would ruin me if he knew I had this stuff," Willie gulped. "Financially and physically. I ought to see what Gert thinks about it. Before I go and bust in on the murderer. Oh, if Kelly knew—"

At that moment a man entered a cigar-store two blocks from Willie's office and called up Kelly.

"Hello, Kelly. That you, Kelly? Right. Yeah, that maroon is monkey-in' around awright. Went up to see this LaTour, Volga's manager. Volga trotted out just after Klump left. You think that cluck has got a lead we don't know nothin' about?"

"Let him ride," Satchelfoot told his henchman. "Let him work for us, Dooley. What beats me is how he does things without no brains. Now tail that guy good, Dooley. I got a guy who likes to make a couple of bucks in that place where Willie eats. He's got ears like Dumbo. This time we don't slip up, Dooley. I should of thought of somethin' like this on my last job. Oke, Dooley."

Willie looked up a number in the phone book. The number of the Sadie Small School for Secretaries. He asked if Gertie Mudgett was there. Gertie was.

"I hope you ain't sore," Willie said. "It was all a misunderstanding, Sugar, about the last time. Same

place for dinner, huh? An' le's not fight as I got somethin' terrible important to talk over an' anyway I'm hungry."

TWO hours later, Willie and Gertie loped into the blue plate bazaar and selected a favorite spot in the back of the eating place.

Willie thought the pot roast would do him. Gertie ordered beef a la mode. When the food was deposited on the checkered cloth Gertie howled because there was no ice cream with the slice of moo cow.

"A la mode is not the same as with pie," Willie said. "Don't start nothin' now, Sugar. Anyways you can have ice cream with your rice pud-din'. Look, Gert, I think I will break the Mischa Miscu murder case to-night."

"Huh?" Gertie asked. "Do you mind if your Josephine makes a phone call? Napoleon gets in from Moscow at eight. I—"

"I am not kiddin'," Willie said. "Mischa had a brother who he did dirt to back in Bulgaria and this Sergy has got to America and he traced Mischa down. There is no doubt that Sergy smeared Mischa and took his roll and family heirloom off his finger which was a ruby."

"Talk slower and say all that again," Gertie said. "You don't act tight, Willie. I can't smell firewater on you."

Willie iterated. He added more to the first batch.

"This Volga told me everythin' as she was sore at Satchelfoot for him thinkin' she nudged Mischa with the ice pick. She says this Sergy lives in the Hotel Remo on Sixth Avenue as they set him up for a week or two, her and her manager."

"It sounds too good to be true," Gertie said. "It will make you famous and rich clients will all come to hire you to find things. Willie, was you kicked by a horse who had a shoe on that had been stomping on four-

leaf clovers all day?"

"It might be my personality. Satchelfoot is too rough and you can git more with honey than you can with horse-radish, Gertie. Volga said she wanted me to solve the case."

Gertie eyed Willie askance.

"Look, you big zany," she snapped. "You wasn't with Volga alone, was you? Why, I bet that Jugo Slob makes passes at anything that is registered in the draft as a male. Willie, if I thought—"

"Oh, don't be silly," Willie said. "What would she see in me?"

"Huh? Oh, then I'm a dope, huh? I am a mental efficient because I got a crush on you, am I? I didn't come here to take that from nobody. I—"

Willie saw the manager coming.

"I didn't mean no such thing, Gert. Boy, you are so touchy. Here is your coat, Sugar. Let's take a walk and patch things up. Oh, don't start in on us," Willie flung at the manager. "We are goin' anyway."

"Sure," Gertie said. "All you serve here should not be put before the starvin' people of Nazi-occupied Europe. They would lay down alongside of it and starve. Don't you never bring me in this dump no more, Willie."

"If he does, we will sue him," the manager countered. "Now go along, the both of you."

A WAITER in the restaurant watched the pair until they were a block away. Then he went into the booth in back and called up Police Headquarters downtown.

"Kelly? This is Frank. You owe me twenty-five bucks an' not five. I got the works. This Klump has a line on a guy who killed that foreigner named Miscu. It is a guy who is his brother and is named Sergy. He had a grudge against this Mischa, I guess."

"Klump told the battle-axe with him that Volga give him the dope. This guy swiped some dough and a ruby ring and they should be in his

hotel room. The joint he hangs out in is the Hotel Remo. Right next to the flea circus. You know—"

"Great stuff," Satchelfoot yelled over the wires. "This'll get you fifty bucks, kid. Boys, we will start for that joint in just five minutes. Will this burn up that guy!"

Willie and Gertie strolled across town to Central Park and settled onto a bench.

"I want you to see the letters," Willie said. "Just to show you I was not kiddin'. You happy once more, Gertie?"

"Yeah, Willie. Didn't we tell that stiff shirt off in the beanery, huh? We have fun even if we do fight."

Gertie Mudgett spread the letters out and eyed them closely. Willie wondered why she read them six times before she looked at him.

"What goes?" Willie wanted to know.

"Willie, it is a good thing I figured to better myself and learn to be a secetary. Firs' thing they taught me was to see my tripewriter was okay and that the keys was cleaned. Willie, look at this: There is only half a tail on all the y's in this letter that Sergy was supposed to have wrote."

"Well, what of it?" Willie asked.

"Not much, dope," Gertie sniffed. "Only the Y's in the letter Volga wrote to you only has half a tail too. Take a look, Willie."

Willie did. He grabbed the letters out of Gertie's hand and clutched them to him.

"Why, this means they was both wrote by the same typewriter, Gert. I—oh, why didn't I git wise? I don't know nothin' about typewriters so—"

"The doll wrote both them letters," Gertie said. "Where would she use a typewriter?"

"Her manager had one in his office," Willie choked out. "Or maybe she has one in her flat. Let's go and find it, Gertie. Oh, I remember now. I saw Volga pick something off La-Tour's coat. You said that time—"

"First we will go and see this Sergy," Gertie Mudgett snapped. "We got to find out if he was framed like I think. I don't know how but I smell a rat."

THERE was a great excitement in the Hotel Remo when Willie and Gertie arrived on the third floor of the fourth-class inn. A tall, gaunt character who looked a lot like Eugene O'Neill to Willie was back up against a wall in a hall room and Satchelfoot Kelly and three cops were working on him.

"Why, what does this mean?" Willie yelped.

"Ha-a-a-a!" Kelly roared. "I crossed you at last, Willie. I let you have the rope and hang yourself so you could lead me to the killer of Mischa. This is one time, Willie Klump that—"

"There's the money on the table, Willie," Gertie said. "An' the ruby ring."

"Sure," Kelly said. "He says he don't remember where he was while Mischa was murdered. He said he was kidnaped for two days and was blindfolded so did not know where he was put or how he got back. That is better than the story of the Three Bears, ha! There's the stuff he grabbed from his brother and we found a hanky here covered with somethin' that was not ketchup. Well, you think you have been very smart lately, don't you, Willie?"

"I am innocence," Serg protested. "I do not remamber notheeng. I do not even see my brawther, Mischa. I don' know how thees monny gat in thees room. Somewan weel please believe me, no?"

"No," Kelly ripped out. "Bring him out to the boiler, guys."

"Well, Gert," Willie said wearily. "No use hangin' around. I'd like to know how Kelly—"

"Ha-a-a-a-a!" Satchelfoot threw after the dejected pair as they plunked down the stairs. "Read the

headlines in the mornin', Willie. You won't find your name in them this time. It should teach you who is smarter."

Out in the street, Willie piled Gertie into a cab. Willie ordered the driver to go to the Longacre Building.

"That foreigner was framed, Willie," Gertie said. "I begin to see myself. Oh if I was not so jumpy right now I would bust out laughin'. Anyway I cannot take chances of bustin' my girdle seein' no more will be made. Can't you drive faster?"

"Them red lights are not up for Christmas, Toots," the cabby thrust out of one corner of his mouth. "Let me do the drivin'. It's bad enough when I take my wife out. I can't slap a stranger in the teeth, so shut up!"

Gertie asked Willie if he was going to let anybody talk to her like that.

"He'd better," the cab driver snapped. "I have had an ulcerated tooth all day. What chance you think he's got?"

"You are just a little unnerved, Gert," Willie said. "Well, here we are and am I glad!"

Willie and Gertie Mudgett hopped up the stairs to LaTour's office and knocked. LaTour let them in.

"You grab the guy yet, Klump?" LaTour said. "Oh, here is a lady to see me, too. She is just the type I want for a spot in a high type burlesque. Wait a moment while I talk salary with her, Klump."

"I am with the gentleman, Jerk!" Gertie yelped. "Anyway this ain't no social call and let's not beat around the hedge. Grab that typewriter, Willie!"

"What?" LaTour howled. "My type. . . You leave your hands off of that, Klump! I don't get—"

"Oh, no?" Willie snapped. "The letters I got from Volga was wrote on the same typewriter, you crook, you! Maybe Mischa's brother come an' wrote blackmail notes on your

typewriter, did he? I bet the Y on that thing has only half a tail. Try it, Gertie!"

LaTour's epidermis became the color of the filling of a chocolate éclair as Gertie plumped down into the chair at the Remingwood and banged the key marked Y. LaTour sidled toward his desk, his hand reaching back.

"We was right, Willie," Gertie yelled. "Grab the mug, Willie!"

LaTour got a Betsy out of a desk drawer and swung around to blitz Willie, but Gertie Mudgett plucked the big demijohn off the water cooler and threw it at LaTour. It bowled the character over just as he fired the cannon and the slug sang past Willie's ear and hit a picture of Volga that was hung on the wall. LaTour got to his hands and knees with the artillery still in his hand and he was in that position when Gertie took a running jump at him and landed on the small of his back.

Willie got a wire basket and shoved it over LaTour's noggin and then he bent the basket so that it would fit LaTour like a fencing helmet. All the while Gertie pounded LaTour until he was as limp as a rug.

"You better confess," Willie said. "We got Volga already and she said you did it."

"Wha-a-a-a?" LaTour croaked. "That doublecrossin' Hungyok. Givin' me the business, hah? It was she who stabbed Mischa. Oh, I was in on it. We slugged Sergy when he showed up and had a couple gorillas I know lug him off while we could frame him up. The cluck never got even a look at brother Mischa."

"Save the rest for downtown," Willie said. "We want a good stenog to take it down."

"An' to think Satchelfoot has arrested Sergy, Willie," Gertie said, adjusting her two-way stretch. "All the time he. . . Well, take him away, Willie. I better git to a beauty parlor, as I'm a mess."

There never had been more confusion in Center Street as far back as the oldest cop could remember. Here the newspaper men were getting the dope on Serge Miscu, murderer of Volga's dancing partner, and Aloysius Kelly was strutting about telling how he figured it all out, when William Klump ushered a disheveled individual into the hoosegow and grill room.

"He has confessed," Willie said. "He wants to tell the rest now. This is Raymond LaTour, manager of Volga, the swell dancin' doll. He admits Volga shivved Mischa. Tell your public, Raymond."

"Awright, I'll tell everythin'," LaTour yipped as two cops held Kelly up. "She ain't goin' to give me the hot squat. It was her idea all along. She and me was going to get married an' it meant she would have to pay Mischa fifty grand accordin' to their agreement. That's a lot of hay to just give away."

"Anyway, Mischa had a yen for her an' said he'd cut the throat of the guy she married. I didn't like the sound of that, so Mischa had to go. When Mischa got word his brother reached this country and was comin' to see him, we started figurin' a way to make him the fall guy."

RAYMOND LA TOUR held an intermission while some big strong men tried to calm Satchelfoot Kelly down.

"This time I was right the first time," the slewfoot yelled. "I figured that Willie—what's the use? You let me go. I got a right to jump off the roof of this buildin' if I want. I—"

"So we knew Serge would come here to find Mischa," LaTour went on. "We fixed it so Mischa wouldn't be around. I took him in a cab to this place and slugged him and blindfolded him, with the help of some pals. So when we brought him back from the joint all blindfolded and in a cab and dumped him out at his

hotel, how could he tell where he was durin' the murder. Oh, that Volga slipped up with that typewriter is all. Why does guys scheme with dames? They ain't got a brain. First thing they do is squeal. Well—"

"You better send some cops to arrest Volga," Willie said to Kelly. "She don't know LaTour has squealed. Go git the homicide squab."

This time the cops had to bear LaTour to the floor and sit on him, he carried on so.

"You crossed me, you moon-eyed—"

"Names won't never hurt me," Willie said. "I was surprised that the cops turned the real killer loose, though. Most of the time, Kelly arrests the wrong one. Like I said once before, Satchelfoot, when there is three-way thinking, you might have a chance. I said at the time I bet it was Volga. That is what you get for copyin' me and havin' me shadowed, Satchelfoot. It is funny city detectives can't find out as much as a private one like me."

The cops let Serge out and he kissed Willie Klump after he had heard everything. He promised Willie a slug of any dough that Mischa might have left behind him.

"My fran'," Serge said. "It ees wan fonny world. Wan theeng was true all the time. Mischa he did steal my monny an' buy the passport himself. I com on cattleboat wheech was torpedoed an' I spend seexteen days in open boat an' do not have dreenk of water. I was going to keel Mischa eef I fin' heem. So instead of gatting hung like I expect, I am goin' to be vary moch alive an' gat some monny."

LaTour groaned and rocked his head in his hands.

"Yeah, that part was true because

Mischa owned up to Volga," he said. "All the time we didn't need to do nothin'. But we wasn't sure Serge would stay mad. You can't figure on nothin' nowadays."

Willie asked for a drink of water with plenty of aspirin in it. He felt a little groggy himself.

VOLGA arrived an hour later and the cops ushering her in looked as if they had come out second best in a tiff with four black leopards. Volga's mascara was all over her map and part of her lipstick had crept down to her chin. One big flatfoot had plenty of the kisser goo on an ear that was half chewed off. Volga called the law some terrible things that she had never learned in a Balkan finishing school.

"Hold her," Willie cried out. "Until I get away."

"So! You gat Volga, hah?" the dancing cupcake screeched. "Where ees the werewolf who blabs averytheeng, no? An' to theenk I fall in love weeth the skonk! Why do I slip op, hah?"

"That's why," Willie grinned, keeping his distance. "You said it, sister. A good secetary like my girl knows enough to have a good typewriter to work with, Volga. Well, the next room you dance in will have dim lights too. But there won't be no cover charge for the spectators, Volga. Personally I never believed in volts for women but if the law says so, who is Willie Klump to—"

"I am gatting a lawyer," Volga said, her pretty knees wobbling.

"I am gettin' out of here," Willie said.

"I am gettin' plastered," Satchelfoot Kelly said as he staggered toward the door. "Forever an' ever."

The Further Exploits of Willie Klump in

PHYSICAL WRECKED

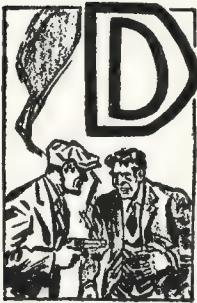
Another Howler by Joe Archibald Coming Next Issue

Mind Over Murder

By LAURENCE DONOVAN

The tonsorial detective swings into a maze of slaughter when he seeks to crack the mystery of a chestnut vendor's hit-and-run death!

CHAPTER I MURDER'S A CHESTNUT



DEATH came silently to the little gray man. Murder just removed him without sound or fury. Other nearby pedestrians were not at the moment unduly alarmed.

The little man, dressed all in gray, fell upon the sidewalk. Two home-going office workers with bundles under their arms were the first to bend over the victim. The pair had been near the little gray man when he had dropped.

Too close. But that had escaped notice. The rustle of a paper bag being suddenly transferred from the victim's topcoat pocket to the coat of one of the "good Samaritans" also escaped attention.

"Sweet patooties!" exclaimed the delectable, red-headed cashier in the window of the corner lunchery. "Joey! You musta given one of your customers a lopsided haircut and it wore him down!"

"Little Joe" Bunt brought all of his five-feet-nothing, hundred-pounds-ditto out of the chair where he was having a rush snack off the arm.

Little Joe took a personal as well as a professional interest in his clientele.

He was barging into the storm door when the delectable redhead said:

"Psst! Rules is rules! Your check's thirty cents, Joey! Pay as you go, Mr. Bunt!" Then, sotto voce, "I'll be waitin', and don't try standin' me up again, Joey, precious!"

"I never did—"

The crash that came then started air raid wardens for ten blocks around blowing their shrill whistles. Only a few yards from the fallen gray man, a neat, two-seater jalopy was all tangled up with the cart of a roast chestnut and pretzel man.

Under cover of this, Little Joe ducked through the lunchery door to the street, leaving the red-headed menace to her squawking. His bright, black, shoe-button eyes took in the wreckage of the chestnut cart, the front fender stripped from the attacking jalopy, and a quick-moving fellow in the midst of the jam.

It seemed for perhaps ten seconds that the man mixed up in the crash might be trying to help the chestnut vendor who showed a pair of feet sticking out from under splinters, chestnut bags and pretzels.

BUT the seemingly helpful stranger scooped up several paper bags of the vendor's chestnuts and sprang

A BAFFLING COMPLETE CRIME NOVELET



Carmelita had the gun,
with its bright silver
silencer, within inches of
Little Joe's stomach

FEATURING JOE BUNT THE BARBER

back into the coupé with the missing fender. The driver, still at the wheel, became a hit-and-run driver as the jalopy rasped away in fast second gear, leaving the chestnut vendor to his fate.

"Of all the mean thieves!" grated Little Joe. "Bat a poor guy over and wreck his business, and even steal some of his chestnuts! Hit-and-run, huh?"

Little Joe's ever-ready notebook and stub of a pencil were whipped out. He caught the license number of the departing coupé under a street light.

The more spectacular crash pulled pedestrians away from the fallen man in gray. An apparent victim of "smoke," which is alcoholic dynamite strained from canned heat, scarcely held the casual attention of hard-boiled Greenwich Villagers.

Little Joe discovered he was standing beside the inert little gray man as he noted the offending hit-and-runner's car number. Thus he was the only bystander who observed at the moment that a reddish damp spot had appeared on the fallen man's overcoat between his shoulders.

"Hey!" yelled a citizen near the smashed chestnut cart, as a police whistle shrilled somewhere. "This poor mug's finished! Get the junk offa him!"

Unobserved, Little Joe went to a knee beside the undoubtedly dead man on the sidewalk. Known as the "Mad Barber" by many in Greenwich Village, Little Joe now gave forth strange words like some form of incantation.

"In the presence of emergency, the reasoning individual will dispense with all normal conventions and restrictions, and act solely upon the intuitive impulse which seems most desirable."

Little Joe had that from "Chapter VIII," entitled "Mind over Matter," in the thick and enlightening volume entitled "Applied Criminal Psychol-

ogy and Persuasion." This great book, reposing on a table in Little Joe's one-chair tansorial parlor at a nearby cubbyhole corner, was his mentor and guide, his sure road to ultimate renown as a detective. And a surer means into one jam after another.

Having swiftly salved his conscience which admitted a general knowledge of the law, with oblique reasoning, Little Joe glanced furtively about, to make sure he was unobserved. His slender, artistic hands dipped expertly into the pockets of a gray overcoat and suit. That act was witnessed only by the unseeing, staring eyes of the corpse in the case.

And Little Joe's transgression against the rigid law that none but an accredited officer shall touch the victim of homicide yielded him exactly nothing but a pack of cigarettes and a book of paper matches.

"Now who could have taken everything off him that quick?" muttered Little Joe. "Someone wanted him unidentified might have done it, but he couldn't have got at the pockets I've pried into. So he did it himself."

Little attention was being given to the fallen gray man and Little Joe. For new excitement arose when clamoring voices over by the wrecked chestnut vendor's cart were lifted indignantly.

"Lookit! He's croaked sure!"

"It's a dirty, hit-and-run murder, that's what it is!"

"Hey! That fella who stole the chestnuts musta conked him after he was down! What won't these hit-and-runners think of next to make sure of their job!"

AMID rising expletives, the realization that the chestnut vendor also was dead percolated to Little Joe's consciousness. The police whistle was coming closer. Someone had phoned the precinct station.

A squad car siren wailed into the block. Balked at finding any identify-

ing articles upon the little gray man who had without doubt been stabbed in the back, Little Joe suddenly noticed that one of the dead man's hands was tightly gripped about something.

In the final few seconds before his personal investigation might be regarded as an infraction of the statutes, Little Joe pulled open the clenched fingers of the corpse. He came to his feet with a small object in his hand.

This was a glossy brown chestnut. He thrust it into his pocket.

"Poor devil," murmured Little Joe. "Must've been hungry and swiped a chestnut off that cart as he passed. Naturally he got one that hadn't been roasted and isn't split open. By jiminee! That won't fit either, seeing this corpus delicti is wearing a benny he could have hocked for five bucks easy, and it isn't cold."

The continued clamor drew Little Joe to the corner. He easily wedged his small person to the forefront of the gaping peasantry of the Village. He was just in time to see and hear a talkative citizen point out:

"Hey—look! This ain't just a hit-and-run killin'! This guy has his head under the cart, and he was on the wrong side to be hit by that car! His face struck the sidewalk, but it's the back of his skull that's smacked in! It's premeditated murder, that's what it is!"

In Little Joe's book "Chapter VIII," entitled "Mind over Matter," advised:

Discreet silence under stress, especially when persons of lesser reasoning powers are divulging their trivial and random thoughts, is always advisable.

Little Joe maintained discreet silence under stress. His fingers touched the smooth, round chestnut in his pocket. Other chestnuts and many huge pretzels surrounded the corpse of the vendor.

Little Joe scrutinized the spot closely. He was surprised to notice



JOE BUNT

that all of the scattered chestnuts were those that had been roasted and split open. He could not see a single chestnut that was still intact.

Murphy, who had this tour—and a tough one it was on Saturday nights—made his way through, dividing the crowd with his blue uniform and appropriate language. Little Joe remained aloof from Murphy.

He had an idea that these mere pavement pounders were envious of his knowledge of the higher forms of criminology, and he well knew by sad experience that this only earned him a pushing around from such minions of the law as were dependent upon brute strength.

Murphy was swearing some as he moved the chestnut vendor's head just enough to have a look at the face.

"An' who is the poor fella?" demanded Murphy. "An' who of you saw the blighted murderer?"

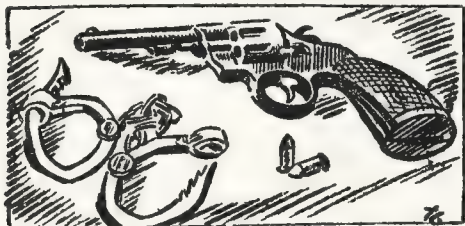
An instant and complete lack of memory developed among the bystanders. Apparently no one had seen it happen, and everyone had arrived after it was all over. Like other Manhattanites who had gained wisdom

under such circumstances, the Villagers present wanted none of it. Time in court may be dead loss.

Little Joe Bunt's long occupancy of his barber shop corner had given him a wide and varied acquaintance with Village residents. Had he cared to, therefore, he could have informed Murphy of something that had caused him to think quickly of the "Cause and Effect" chapter in his book of "Applied Criminal Psychology and Persuasion."

For he had identified the ratty face of one "Tinker" Modoc, a shady character if there ever was one. And this was the first time Little Joe had known that the nefarious Tinker Modoc ever engaged in such an honest occupation as vending chestnuts and pretzels.

Lifting leathers in subway crowds or acquiring highly valuable automobile tires had always been much more in Tinker Modoc's line. Only Murphy of all the police who pounded beats in



this vicinity would have failed to connect Tinker Modoc's face with a record. But Murphy was somewhat green on this tour.

Some observant citizen just then called out from up near the lunchery: "Say! This fella back here ain't been smoked up! He's been bumped off!"

Little Joe, the Mad Barber, had his own methods. He knew this was his cue to exit quietly in the direction of his one-chair shop.

In front of the lunchery, the persistent redhead stepped in front of Little Joe.

"Two bits and a nickel, Joey," she demanded. "And don't try givin' me the brush-off when you shut up shop tonight after work."

CHAPTER II

STRANGE HOLD-UP



LITTLE JOE BUNT hoped he had not been detected by anyone as he had briefly searched the pockets of the little gray man who was a corpse on the sidewalk. Nevertheless, he took precautions.

He retired to a convenient doorway where he remained until the police cars and the black wagons had come and gone, and the crowd had thinned out. It was not until half an hour later that he reached his one-chair "Tonsorial Parlor, Haircut to Fit Any Face," in a corner cubbyhole, a block from the scene of the sudden murders.

Wall chairs were occupied. Jefferson Davis Lee, all-around boy, was shining shoes. Little Joe glanced in, but turned toward a short, broad man with a queerly mottled face who was pacing up and down the sidewalk, off to one side of the shop window light.

"Waitin' long, Mr. Parks?" Little Joe asked. "I was held up by watchin' a car crash up the street."

Mr. Parks' hands were clasped behind his back. As he walked over to Little Joe, his shabby overcoat flapped back from worn trousers, baggy at the knees.

"Don't mind waiting, Joe," he said in a husky, whispering voice which indicated that perhaps his residence should be Arizona. "I am still looking them over. Seeing your customers, I'll bet you that half of them would kill a man for ten bucks."

Little Joe smiled, but he felt uneasy under the fixed stare of Mr. Parks' pale eyes, which seemed too big for his mottled face. Having just come from attending two murders, and having a lot of thinking to do about it, Little Joe was oppressed by the

cheerless attitude of Mr. Parks.

"You've got the neighborhood wrong, Mr. Parks," said Little Joe. "Even if some of my customers appear peculiar, and dress queerly, they're just being Villagers. Most of them only murder the Muse."

Mr. Parks managed a skeptical, husky laugh.

"I'll still stay away from dark alleys while I'm pursuing my experiments that keep me down here," said Mr. Parks. "I'll drop in when the shop's empty, a little later, Joe."

Little Joe was facing Mr. Parks and barely heard the scuffling of feet behind him. A hard, heavy hand was clamped over his mouth. A fist drove into his ribs from the side and his breath went out with a whoosh.

Little Joe saw a long arm that seemed to shoot past his head, with bunched knuckles that clipped Mr. Parks on the chin. The hand over Little Joe's mouth relaxed suddenly, but just as abruptly the soft but solid thock of a sapper took him behind one ear.

Little Joe got groggily to his hands and knees. His customers were rushing out of the shop. Jefferson Davis Lee looked as if his ebony face had been painted with green chalk.

"Fo' the luva Pete, Mista Joe?" he wailed. "What happened?"

One of the barber shop customers was coming out with a wet towel. Instead of putting it on Little Joe's aching head, he applied it to the man lying on the sidewalk a little distance away.

Little Joe saw that Mr. Parks had been knocked out cold. The towel brought him around, and the mottled-faced man sat up blinking.

"Perhaps you can explain, Joe?" said Mr. Parks, his angry voice wheezing in his throat. "Why did you have to sock me when those two fellows grabbed you?"

"I socked you, Mr. Parks!" exclaimed Little Joe.

"Well, didn't you? All I saw was

one man with a hand over your mouth, and another behind him in the darkness, and up come your fist, Joe. Possibly it was just reflex action."

"That reflex action was from someone behind me, Mr. Parks," said Little Joe. "Did you see the men's faces?"

"I didn't have time to see anything but a million colored lights," whispered Mr. Parks, rubbing his chin. "Lord, what a wallop. But I wonder why."

HE WAS running his hands into pockets. He brought out his wallet and a watch.

"No, it wasn't robbery," he said. "Looks as if they were after you, Joe, and I just got in the way."

Little Joe found everything in his pocket intact, except—one glossy brown chestnut taken off the dead little man in gray was missing.

He had to think fast though to avoid explaining. He smiled sheepishly at Mr. Parks and his other customers.

"I think I know what it is," he said. "I guess we all have blonde troubles sometimes, and at a dance the other night—"

Little Joe permitted his quickly contrived suggestion to trail off. A voice that was pitched intentionally on a high nasal and scornful tone said: "At a dance the other night? Yes, Joey, go on! That wouldn't be last Wednesday night when you stood me up to go work out in the gym, would it, precious?"

Little Joe's customers beat a hasty retreat into the barber shop. Even Mr. Parks muttered hurriedly:

"I'll drop back for my trim later, Joe." And he walked quickly away up the street.

"Well, at a dance—you take it from there?" said the redhead.

"Now wait a minute, honey," said Little Joe, rubbing his sore head. "A psychological criminologist has to think up things like that in a hurry. You see—"

Red-headed Della Corcoran, the little lady of the lunchery, was in no mood to see. For she had something more on her mind than her fiery hair.

"I see," she cut in, "that maybe it has something to do with a green-eyed, painted, sleazy-looking doll who dropped into the beanery just after you tried to play detective an' walk out on your supper check."

"I don't get you, sweetheart," said Little Joe truthfully. "There wasn't any dance, and there wasn't any blonde—"

"This green-eyed doll's as blond as they bleach 'em," fired back the redhead. "An' all she was wantin' to know was what time you shut up your shop tonight? So I took a minute off to drop over and see what you had on your mind, if anything?"

"I never heard of any such person. I—"

The redhead was on her way, but she shot back over her shoulder:

"And if she wants to look the same, there won't be any such person at ten o'clock when I come back! So you guess we all have blonde troubles, you tell the boys!"

Little Joe wondered if he would have to make it a wrist-watch to square this rap?

But he was wondering more now about the strange and sudden attack upon Mr. Parks and himself, all over a glossy brown chestnut that had been in a dead man's hand.

"Wish Big Jim would come along, but he won't be on duty until midnight," Little Joe was thinking, as he entered the shop.

"Big Jim" O'Grady, first-grade detective out of Headquarters, was Little Joe's friend and mentor. For years Little Joe had tried every means of getting on the Force. But five-feet-nothing and an even one hundred pounds balked him.

Nevertheless, Little Joe Bunt had become a detective all on his own, and a headache much of the time to duly appointed minions of the Man-

hattan public guard. He had read a book.

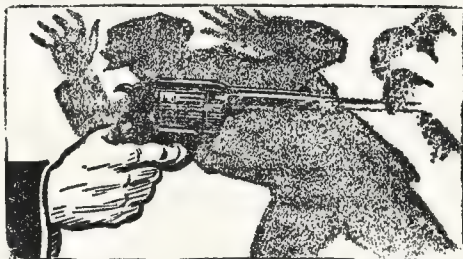
That book was the same thick volume of "Applied Criminal Psychology and Persuasion" from which he always quoted, and which reposed on a table in his barber shop.

ONLY Little Joe did not refer to it as a barber shop. Gilded letters announced to the world this was:

JOE BUNT'S TONSORIAL PARLOR HAIRCUTS TO FIT ANY FACE

Little Joe's razor flew, and his shears snicked fast. It was twenty minutes before ten o'clock when the shop was cleared. He had double trouble on his mind.

Red-headed Della Corcoran would be along. And Little Joe more than imagined that the "Eye" was still



upon him, the same eye that had brought about that quick knock-down hold-up, merely for the theft of a brown chestnut.

"Keep your eye on the shop a few minutes, Jeff," he said to Jefferson Davis Lee, the porter. "I'm grabbing a cup of coffee."

"Mista Joe's sure a sucker for takin' it on the chin," said Jeff, as Little Joe went out.

Little Joe was cautious. He was reasonably sure he was not being tailed as he slipped past the lunchery without the redhead seeing him.

The wrecked chestnut cart, merely moved to one side, gave mute testimony to where Tinker Modoc had given up the ghost. And few persons were moving about as Little Joe kicked about in the gutter, scattering some opened roasted chestnuts which

were still lying there.

He had almost given up finding what he sought, when one glossy brown unroasted chestnut was kicked out. Little Joe pocketed it in haste.

He was unlucky going back past the lunchery. The redhead never seemed to overlook a bet. She glanced out the window just in time to see Little Joe passing, coming from the wrong direction.

Little Joe hurried on. He had tried to dismiss Della Corcoran's story of a green-eyed blonde asking about him as one of her bluffs. Yet he had been held up, and Mr. Parks had also been knocked out, and neither of them could identify the two men who had taken the chestnut which had been gripped in the hand of the little gray man who had been murdered on the sidewalk.

Mr. Parks was waiting as Little Joe came in. He had a bump on his chin, and Little Joe put a cold towel on it. "The usual, Mr. Parks?" said Little Joe.

"A little more than usual, Joe," said Mr. Parks, lying back in the chair. "I may not get in next week, and this new kind of haircut is the only one that seems to go with these scars of mine. That dropping it at the sides sort of hides the cuts."

"Sure does," said Little Joe.

He was thinking of a month ago when Mr. Parks had first come into his shop. At that time Mr. Parks said he had just been in an auto accident, and his face had been almost obscured by taped bandages. Some remarkable surgery evidently had been required to partly straighten a broken nose, and to prevent his mouth from having a permanent twist to one side.

The kind of a short, rounded haircut Mr. Parks had had at that time would have made the scars more prominent. So Little Joe, with his "Haircuts to Fit Any Face," had really been remedying that by reshaping the kind of a haircut that the man had been used to for years.

CHAPTER III

THE UNKNOWN CORPSE



JOE paid off Jefferson Davis Lee and let him go. As Mr. Parks sweated under a hot towel, he turned on the radio.

He desired mightily to have a police report on the strange murders, but he was too smart to call the precinct station. Unless the radio gave forth something, Little Joe would wait for Big Jim O'Grady.

The radio was suddenly obliging. A news bulletin came through.

"Police have been unable to identify a youngish man stabbed to death in Circle Street, Greenwich Village, at about the same time a known character, Tinker Modoc, a minor criminal, apparently was slugged to death after a chestnut vending cart was wrecked by a hit-and-run driver. The man who was stabbed had no marks of identification on him except clothing labels. He was well-dressed, but it is supposed that his wallet was taken as he lay dead, before the stabbing was discovered."

There followed a detailed description of the murdered man.

"Turn that blasted thing off, Joe," Mr. Parks said irritably. "I don't want to hear any more. After what happened to me tonight, I'm moving out of this dangerous neighborhood."

Little Joe argued some for his neighbors, but he was working fast on that hair trim. It was but five minutes to ten. The red-headed unshakable would be showing up five minutes after.

"You've just about lost all that swell sun-tan you had when you first came here, Mr. Parks," said Little Joe. "I suppose that work on your face bleached it out a lot. You're a different man."

"Sure—sure," said Mr. Parks.

"Used a lot of antiseptics, and it feels as I'd been boiled."

Little Joe pulled the apron from around Mr. Parks' neck. As he did, his special customer's neck was well exposed. Little Joe said nothing of an idea that had suddenly hit him, but he asked a question.

"You mean you're leaving the neighborhood right away, Mr. Parks? If so, I'd like to know how the haircut and everything works out. I try to keep track of unusual customers. You moving uptown?"

Mr. Parks climbed stiffly out of the chair. It was exactly ten o'clock.

"I'll give you a ring, Joe," he said. "Don't know where I'll be located."

He walked behind a corner for his topcoat and hat. Little Joe heard the door open. When he turned around, there she was.

She was a green-eyed blonde. She was wearing her clothes with the same general effect of a bubble dancer doing her act. Her mouth was a red slash, and too many bits of ice flashed from her fingers and wrists as her hands moved.

She hadn't spoken when Mr. Parks came into view with his coat. Mr. Parks looked straight at the girl, then glanced at Little Joe. The girl stood there, one hand arranging golden yellow hair.

It was the first time Little Joe had seen Mr. Parks amused. Mr. Parks uttered a quick, wheezy laugh.

"Then you weren't putting on an act when you said those thugs might be the result of blonde troubles," he said, then added, "but I think you're making a mistake meeting a stripper in your own neighborhood, Joe. And"—his words were slow and seemed almost menacing—"the stripper is making a bigger mistake coming here. Good-night, Joe."

LITTLE JOE saw the girl's hands clench. She was looking at Mr. Parks' bleached-out, scarred face, as if she thought she should know him,

but didn't, and only resented what he had said.

"You can keep your grand advice to yourself, chum," she said venomously, in Mr. Parks' direction.

She turned to Joe as Mr. Parks shrugged his broad shoulders, and went on out.

"So you're Little Joe Bunt, the one they call the Mad Barber detective?" the girl exclaimed. "You know me, Joe?"

Little Joe's memory had picked up after Mr. Parks had mentioned stripper.

"Sure, I know you, Carmelita," said Little Joe. "Or have you another name? And I'm closing, so I haven't any time."

The clock said two minutes after ten, and was about three minutes to a red-headed tornado. The yellow-haired threat undulated toward him and Little Joe moved away abruptly.

"This isn't the Red Goose Club, Carmelita, and I have no idea why I should be honored," he said.

"I'll come to the point, Joe Bunt," said Carmelita, gliding still nearer. "They tell me that you're a wizard with hair, male or female. There's a new Hollywood hair-do I like, and I've been told you designed it for a hairdresser out there. So I'm having you do my hair that way."

"I'm not in that business," said Little Joe, desperately watching his last minute before the redhead started to slip by. "Sorry, but now will you go? I'm expecting—"

"You're expecting no one, because you'll do my hair tonight," said the stripper softly. "And we're going to my apartment now, where you will find every convenience."

Little Joe had an automatic, but it was over in the table drawer. Not that he expected to have any use for it now.

"Sorry again, but—"

The little gun had a bright silver silencer which stood out against Carmelita's brilliantly red purse. She

had the gun within inches of Little Joe's stomach. She put it into her purse then, but kept her hand upon it and the purse close to Little Joe's side.

"My own car's half a block up the street," she said. "Let's go. Too bad for you that you had finished with your last customer."

"Has this anything to do with—" began Little Joe.

"You are going to do my hair in my apartment, that's all!"

Little Joe shut up. He conned over a dozen passages from the chapter on "Mind over Matter." It didn't seem to have anything that might apply to mind over murder.

Little Joe saw the redhead coming along as they started up the street. He saw her stop and stare after him and the murderous stripper, and then come on, half running. Carmelita heard her and she turned.

"Here's where you have a chance to put the girl-friend in her place," said the stripper quietly. "I have my reasons for not giving a care whether I have to quiet one or both of you. So you do the talking."

"Della, honey, listen!" Little Joe tried to make it sound all right. "I've a big job that just came along. I'm going—"

"To the devil in a hand basket!" snapped Della Corcoran. "So this is the blonde, and there *was* a dance! I suppose I should scratch her eyes out, but I won't! If you're down to the level of a stripper from the Red Goose! Now I remember her! Well, she's all yours, Joe Bunt! You can have her!"

Little Joe blinked. He couldn't quite figure the redhead. Then he caught the glint of her eyes, and they were looking straight at Carmelita's purse, her hand inside it, and the purse touching Little Joe's ribs.

THE redhead turned, walked stiffly away.

"Keep going, Joe," said the strip-

per. "The big car this side of the corner. You'll drive."

Little Joe was trying to make sense of this, but he couldn't. There was something though in a taxicab and another closed car that seemed to stick in the rear-view mirror clear across town.

"Take the Hudson River Parkway north at Seventy-second," said the stripper. "Turn off Fifth Avenue and west through Central Park"

"Listen, baby," argued Little Joe. "What do you think this will get you? What do you want? Is it—"

"It might have been the chestnut, yes," interrupted Carmelita. "But not any more, not after I came into your shop. It's you, Little Joe, just you that's wanted now. Turn west at the next block and cross over to West Seventy-second Street."

Little Joe waited until they were in Central Park. The road was winding, with no traffic in sight. He thought it was about time he made his play. He speeded up, thinking that a fast brake and a quick arm would wash this up fast.

The big car came from behind, booming along at sixty or better. Little Joe couldn't make the next turn quickly enough to keep ahead or to cut it off. And the big car took the right-hand side suddenly.

The two cars ground fenders, raced side by side, and Carmelita first tried to pull the gun in her purse around. She didn't scream and Little Joe liked her a bit better for that.

Joe had no time to close either door window. It would have made but slight difference. Chopper steel never even hesitates for anything except shatter-proof glass.

Little Joe saw the black snout of the machine-gun. Rocks at one side looked better to him than the deadly muzzle. He swerved the big car, but he was too late to do anything for Carmelita.

As the front wheels of their car climbed the rocks, the blond strip-

teaser was almost decapitated by chopper slugs. The wheel cracked under Little Joe's hands, but his size was in his favor.

He slid down under the wheel, with Carmelita's life blood bathing his face as more steel tore wickedly through the car. Then the murder car was gone, whirling around a curve toward West Seventy-second Street.

By one of those curious freaks of fate, the wrecked car had escaped being set afire, and its instrument lights still burned. Little Joe had the silenced automatic out of the stripper's purse. A compact and some other doodads fell out.

A package of letters and some newspaper clippings caught Little Joe's eye. He had only time enough to glance at a photograph in a clipping from a Miami, Florida, newspaper. It was enough.

Little Joe heard a car coming and judged it might be the taxicab he was sure Della Corcoran was riding in. He made a swift decision. Blood stained his clothes as he got Carmelita's body out and pulled it to one side.

He went back, took a long chance. He was running as the fuel tank exploded. The taxicab came into sight as fire rolled over the wrecked car of Carmelita, the strip-teaser.

CHAPTER IV

BRING BACK A BLONDE



IT TURNED out as Little Joe Bunt hoped it would. The driver of the taxi in which Della was following the Mad Barber was Mike Corcoran, Della's huge, red-headed brother. Being in the approximate middle of Central Park, even the chopper explosions had gone unnoticed outside the park, for their

sound had also been merged with the unmuffled roar of the big car when it had swung in alongside the blonde's car. But of course Della and her brother had heard.

Little Joe anticipated that this would be a tough spot. You can't dash up to the red-headed girl of your heart and say:

"I've got a dead blonde in a wrecked car, and we have to get her out of the park."

But that was about the way Little Joe put it. And the redhead's big brother towered over him, while for a moment or two the redhead herself said nothing. She was still somewhat awed by the gun explosions she and her brother had been close enough to hear, and was surprised to find Little Joe alive and kicking. She just stared at him as he came racing around a bend, to flag them down.

"An' a blonde is it, Joey, me boy?" big Mike was saying, as Little Joe spoke a word or two of hasty explanation. "An' I suppose you got so mixed up with the dame that you was forgettin' the road turns here an' there?"

Carmelita's automobile was a flaming mass by now. There was no doubt but that policemen of one kind or another would shortly be arriving. Little Joe led the way toward the burning car and pointed.

"Holy saints!" Mike Corcoran said, gaping. "You're after treating your blondes rough! How come?"

"There's no time to tell about it now," said Little Joe. "Help me get her into the taxi. We have to get her out of here. And Mike, you've got to get in touch with the cops and tell them you saw a crash here, and you think two persons were burned in that car, and that there was a shoot-in."

"Well, I like that!" blazed the red-headed sister. "Come on, Mike! Joey plays around with blondes, and look what it gets him. We know nothing about this."

"I see what Joey means, Sis," said Brother Mike. "Maybe he is facing a murder rap . . . All right, Joey. I'll take a chance."

He picked up Carmelita who was not nearly so attractive as she had been in her exotic life. With Della Corcoran still protesting and refusing to be convinced, they managed to start moving as the first of the police sirens hooted into the park.

Mike Corcoran was a wise hackie. With the woman's corpse in the rear and his sister beside him, Mike pulled a smart one. He was meeting a police car and he suddenly ran his taxi up on a bank, tipping it perilously.

The police car halted. Little Joe crouched down beside the body of the stripper. As a squad man came striding up, swearing, Mike Corcoran was outdoing him with oaths.

"The so-and-sos! Runnin' me offa the street! If I ever run onto that bunch of hoodlums, I'll make 'em think they've landed on Wake Island! The blasted killers!"

"Here, fella! What's this! Think you're out for a picnic on the park grass!"

"Picnic, is it?" snapped Mike. "You'd think it was a whole fool jamboree! See that fire back there! First them hoods turn a chopper on a man an' girl in that bus an' burn 'em down! Then they run me offa the road!"

"A man and a girl in that car?"

"Yeah, an' deader'n mackerel, even if the bus ain't turned into one of them funeral pears! There ain't much chance o' gettin' their bodies out, there ain't!"

"Okay, fella! Name an' number?"

"Mike Corcoran, Number Forty-six, seventy-nine, Copper. An' if this cab's busted—"

"Oh, Mike Corcoran," said the policeman. "Just another good Swede. Okay, Mike, be around in the morning. Where's your stand?"

"Circle Street, Greenwich Village. An' ask anybody—"

MIKE was perspiring freely as he backed the taxi into the driveway and started out of the park.

"If you don't lay off that fishology readin', Joey, we'll all be in a hearse instead of runnin' one," grunted Mike.

Little Joe was sweating, too. Only the moisture sliding down his back was cold.

Red-headed Della was coldly, ominously silent as the taxicab worked its way back downtown. Mike Corcoran never had been a hackie to miss jumping red lights close. He stopped, even when he mistook a red neon sign for a traffic signal.

"An' what're we supposed to do with the corpse, Joey?" he said out of the corner of his mouth, as they came into Greenwich Village. "We can get thirty years for movin' a *corpus delictor* in a murder. What if I just take a chance and dump the body in the East River?"

"We'll find a blanket at your place, Mike, and carry the girl into my sleepin' room at the shop," suggested Little Joe.

The redhead put out a bit of sarcasm for the first time.

"This blonde's awfully dead, Joey—er—Mr. Bunt. Remember?"

Nevertheless, the mortal remains of Carmelita were reposing in the back room of Little Joe's barber shop half an hour later.

"It'll cost you ten for cleanin' the cab," said Mike Corcoran.

"Now if I can be alone," said Little Joe. "No, Mike. You wait. Della you go on home. I'm sorry, but our date's off."

"You're calling our date off? You're calling nothing off except what this cheap chunk of ice means. You take it, Joey. I have no further use for it."

The redhead flounced out, leaving Brother Mike with Little Joe.

"I'm bettin' when you two have kids, you'll have to keep 'em in separate cages," said Mike.

Little Joe was listening on the radio.

"How about calling the police precinct station?" he said to Mike. "It'll be a couple of hours before they find out there are no bodies in that wreck."

"Okay, Joey. But I ain't spillin' who I am. What should I be tellin' the law?"

In a moment, Mike, talking from a public phone booth outside, was saying:

"From the description of that burned car on the radio, I'm afraid a friend of mine, Joseph Bunt, the barber of Circle Street, Greenwich Village, was in it with Carmelita, the strip-teaser at the Red Goose Club. Is there any hope?"

When Mike came back in, Little Joe was thumbing through the thick book of "Applied Criminal Psychology and Persuasion." Beside the book lay a smooth, glossy brown chestnut. A plug had been removed from a hole bored in one end of the chestnut.

Little Joe was looking at a candid camera snapshot between pages of the book. He was comparing the photo with two pictures in clippings from Miami newspapers.

"There ain't no hope that you an' Carmelita are alive, the cops say," announced Mike. "Now what do we play? Ma didn't bring me up to be an undertaker."

"Mike," said Little Joe, "you've seen that funny-looking Mr. Parks who has been coming here for the past month?"

"Sure, I seen him. So what?"

"I think he moved tonight, an' havin' no car, he probably called a taxi. He didn't say where he might be moving. I thought he might remember something about two boys who knocked him out and held me up tonight."

"I'll do some checkin'," said Mike. "But, Joey, before this blows up in your face, whyn't we get rid of the corpse?"

LITTLE JOE shook his head. The radio blared out a news bulletin.

"Latest information of the police is that Carmelita, a tease dancer at the famous Red Goose Club, and Joseph Bunt, better known as the Mad Barber, of Greenwich Village, are in the wreck of the burned car in Central Park. From a reliable witness, it has been stated that Carmelita and Joseph Bunt probably were victims of a machine-gun which ran their car off the driveway."

Mike Corcoran was gone, checking. Little Joe had carefully turned out the light in his shop. That didn't keep



a heavy foot from kicking the door open, breaking the lock.

Little Joe couldn't see the face, but he knew that bulky figure and the weight of the foot. Big Jim O'Grady, first-grade detective.

"Psst! Jim! Easy!"

"Mother mine!" exclaimed Big Jim. "Joe, that you? Why. I just heard—"

"Back this way, Jim," cut in Little Joe.

He closed the door of his sleeping room before he switched on the light. The ghastly body of Carmelita lay across the couch.

"Holy heaven, Joe! You'll get life for this! An' what is it all about? You killed the poor girl, huh, an' think you can get away with murder!"

"Jim, you've got to help," said Little Joe. "This is big. It reaches all the way from Florida to South America to New York, and—"

"Right into the little brick house in the middle of the Sing Sing yard where they've wired a chair, an' not for sound," groaned Big Jim. "Joey, I got to take you in until this is cleared up."

Little Joe had a murder to solve. Well, three murders, thus far.

"Jim," he said, "just between us, who was the man in the gray clothes who was killed down here tonight? The police haven't given out anything."

"I wouldn't be divulgin' department confidences, an' that you well know, Joe," said Big Jim righteously. "If the inspector an' the F. B. I. are wantin' to keep the name o' John Macklin one of the Feds, under cover, I would be violatin' my oath of office—"

"And I wouldn't be wanting you to, Jim," said Little Joe. "But if you'll tail me close when Mike comes back, if he's lucky, an' I don't hand you the hottest case you ever had, all wrapped up, then you can be taking me in, Jim, for killing Carmelita with an overdose of sleeping tablets."

"Killing Carmelita with—" Big Jim started to roar, but Mike Corcoran clumped into the front shop.

"The address he gave was Fordor City Apartments in the Fifties," was Mike's information. "He only had one suitcase, so the hackie who took him up there didn't get the apartment number."

"If they stumble onto the corpse, Joe, it'll mean my badge," said Big Jim O'Grady.

"They'll not stumble onto the corpse, Jim," said Little Joe suddenly. "The 'Mind over Matter' chapter, 'Chapter Eight,' in 'Applied Criminal Psychology and Persuasion,' says the surprise of unexpected possession of some undesired object will often confuse the impressionable individual. So—"

When Little Joe finished talking, Big Jim was mopping sweat from his red face.

CHAPTER V

THE MAD BARBER



OME lone individual in Greenwich Village may have failed to believe in Little Joe Bunt's right to the title of the "Mad Barber", but not Big Jim O'Grady, detective first-grade. He was more sure of that when he had

ridden with Little Joe to the new apartment to which Mr. Parks had moved—the Fordor Apartment Hotel.

"An' I don't even dare to call out a squad or tip off the precinct, me bein' off duty," groaned Big Jim. "I can't do more than back you up, Joe, so I'll go up to this Parks' rooms with you."

"I'll go up alone," said Little Joe. "I only want to inquire if Mr. Parks has by now remembered the faces of the mugs who hit him and held me up. And I have a chestnut to give him."

Big Jim looked as if he would have preferred the hottest spot in the Malay jungles at this moment. Which might have been no hotter than the trunk he had to watch the unsuspecting hackie lug out of the taxi to be delivered to Mr. Parks. The hackie—Little Joe had managed to run down the same taxi man who had driven Mr. Parks away from Greenwich Village to his new home—protested at the weight of the trunk, but a fiver shut him up.

Little Joe went straight to the desk of the apartment hotel. The hackman, following him, was groaning under the burden of the small trunk, and a bell-hop helped him lower it to the floor. Little Joe gave the desk clerk a detailed description of Mr. Parks.

"My friend is peculiar," he explained, "and doesn't like to be swamped by all of his acquaintances as soon as he gets into town. So I wouldn't know the name he's regis-

tered under. But he left orders for this trunk to be brought from my place right away."

The clerk reached for the phone.

"And your name, sir?" he asked.

"Just say a friend from the Red Goose Club," supplied Little Joe. "And tell him the trunk with the stuff in it is on the way up by the freight elevator. And send it right along."

Little Joe Bunt had never taken a bigger gamble. If he had guessed wrong, Mr. Parks might make a break for it. But he judged Mr. Parks would wait. Mr. Parks did.

"Mr. Parks says to come right up," said the clerk, and then Little Joe knew that Mr. Parks must have at least stuck to his Greenwich Village name.

The clerk was about to add something else, but closed his mouth. If he had spoken, he might have saved Little Joe a big headache. He said only:

"It's Four-o-four, to the left of the elevator."

The fourth floor corridor seemed quiet, but Little Joe had an idea that eyes were upon him. He was alone, and he felt smaller than he actually was when he was in front of the solid door of Room 404.

Mr. Parks himself opened the door. He had on a dressing gown, and his hand was in one pocket. If Mr. Parks was surprised to see Little Joe, reported by radio to be burned to death, a report now in the latest newspaper editions, he never batted his pale eyes.

"Joe!" he exclaimed. "Well, I don't know how you did it, but come in. After I saw that blonde in your shop, I didn't think you'd be in circulation again tonight."

Little Joe was tense, expectant. Either he was dead wrong, or Mr. Parks was the coolest number he had ever met. But he couldn't be wrong. And he wasn't.

Mr. Parks led the way from the small foyer into a big living room. Two strangers sat upon a lounge.

Each stranger had a silenced automatic held casually upon his knee.

MR. PARKS chuckled softly, starting to turn back toward Joe.

"You see, Joe, I found out I'd made a mistake hunting a one-man barber shop a few days after I first had you go to work on me," said Mr. Parks. "I heard all about you being known as the Mad Barber. So I took precautions. Some of the boys seem to have made a mistake tonight in the park, but I'm sure they will remedy that when you leave with them."

Little Joe sighed resignedly. His face was the picture of dejection. He didn't lift his hands as Mr. Parks took an automatic from his side pocket.

"I happened to know that Carmelita didn't recognize me, Joe," said Mr. Parks. "She was hunting you up for a different reason—not to look for me, though she has done a lot of that since I decided to give her the air. You see, Joey, there was another girl—but we needn't go into that. I guess you know how it is, though."

"Carmelita was useful to me—very useful. But the best of them can be done without when they get—well, too personal, shall we call it? Or too possessive? Besides, Carmelita had a vindictive streak, you could never tell what she might do or say, and she was getting bothersome. She didn't know me with my new face, but she did not believe I was dead, and kept trying to find me, and . . . Well, we needn't go into that either, seeing she's out of the way now."

"And that being the case, I take it you're figuring how much what you know is worth to you. I don't deal that way. By the way, I'm interested to know how you happened to escape in Central Park."

"Luck tossed me out—or maybe it was bad luck," Little Joe said disconsolately. "Look, Mr. Parks, have I said a word to the cops or anybody about Carmelita being bumped and burned in the car?"

"How much did Carmelita spill?" Mr. Parks asked huskily.

"Well, enough to make me think I might join up with you, Mr. Parks," Little Joe said. "And she *did* come to my barber shop with the idea that I might know something about where you were—though the name of the man she was looking for was not Parks. She kidnaped me, said I was to give her a hair-do at her apartment, but I guess she wanted to find out a few things.

"From what she did say, though, I got some ideas of my own. In a way, now that she's gone, and I know what she used to be doing for you, I could take her place. I know hundreds of people, and even a better way for doing what you want done than using chestnuts."

"Then what was this gag about the Red Goose and a trunk?" said Mr. Parks.

"Well, I'm puttin' myself in your hands, Mr. Parks," said Little Joe. "Just to prove myself, I have some junk cached in that trunk. And some stuff that will prove I know a slicker way than the roasted chestnut gag to get it around and sold to the right people. Only I haven't any way to get an organization like you have, Mr. Parks. Slick it is, I'm here to say, like when that chestnut vendor was about to get taken in, and got rubbed out before he could break down and talk. If you—"

Knuckles pounded on the door, and the buzzer also sounded.

"What the devil is this?" wheezed Mr. Parks. "You're not suggesting that perhaps the barber shops—"

"No, not that way, Mr. Parks," said Little Joe. "The whole system I've worked out is in the trunk."

"Open that door, Spike," wheezed Mr. Parks. "Watch your step. Ruddy, put Joe in that closet. We'll see."

TWO bell-hops deposited a trunk in the middle of the big room. In the clothes closet, Little Joe heard Mr.

Parks exclaim as the bell-hops went out and the door closed.

"Possibly this crazy barber thinks he has something. Okay, let him out. We'll see what this is."

When they let Little Joe out he said:

"I have the key. I'll open the trunk for you." He stepped toward it.

"No, you don't," said Mr. Parks shoving Little Joe to one side. "We'll do the opening."

"Boss, look!" exclaimed one of the mugs. "At the bottom of the trunk!"

A red line had formed along the trunks' bottom. It had just started and was spreading to the rug.

"Keep a rod in his belly!" wheezed Mr. Parks. "If it's what I think it is, we'll have to—"

One mug pushed his rod into Little Joe's ribs. But Little Joe was watching the mug's eyes. The red fluid from the trunk was beginning to spread more rapidly.

"Gosh, Boss!" the frightened lug holding a gun on Little Joe shouted. "It'll mark the room! We have to get that trunk out!"

"Be quiet," ordered Mr. Parks. He lifted the trunk lid.

Seeing the gangster beside him with the gun in his ribs staring at the rising trunk lid, Little Joe dropped. The surprised mug tried to snap his rod down, but the back alleys had been a tough spot for the fighting education of a kid who had been known as a runt.

Little Joe's weight was behind the fist that blurred into the mug's stomach. The rod exploded, but Little Joe rolled, as there came another, but mushier blast. It came from the trunk as Mr. Parks lifted the lid. The dozen or more tear gas eggs that Little Joe had taken the precaution to pack in that trunk when he had prepared it for this moment, exploded. The very act of lifting the lid had released the bomb pins. Blinding, yellowish tear gas vapor mushroomed through the room.

It came too fast for Mr. Parks or either of his boys to dodge it. And the container of red ink which Little Joe had placed where it would do the most good had soaked through the bottom of the trunk just in time to give Mr. Parks and his nice killers the wrong idea of what that trunk contained.

Undoubtedly they had expected to see the body of Carmelita, the strip-teaser.

Little Joe, rolling, had a folded gas mask from under his shirt and over his head before he either opened his eyes or breathed. He came up, as the cursing Mr. Parks and the other two boys fought their way toward the windows.

Little Joe moved quietly, having fixed the position of the room telephone. He made no sound whatever until he upset the phone table with a crash and sprang swiftly to one side.

A rod smashed in the blinding haze, but Little Joe was not there.

"We've got to get out!" yelled Mr. Parks, and his voice was no longer husky.

Little Joe's accurately timed fist smashed the exact spot from which the words issued and Mr. Parks went down with a thump. Little Joe was flat on the floor again as he heard the man's two henchmen collide.

H E HAD the automatic Mr. Parks had taken from his pocket. He cracked out two shots with it, shooting purposely low. One mug groaned and fell and the other one apparently took a header over a chair.

The corridor door opened and Little Joe felt the cool breeze from outside.

"Joe!" Big Jim O'Grady's voice roared. "You all right, Joe?"

Little Joe walked into Big Jim's thick arms.

It was some time later before the room could be cleared of the gas, to collect Mr. Parks and his two mugs, one with a broken leg. It was a little later then that when Little Joe Bunt

did his explaining at the precinct station.

"It's all in knowing how to cut hair to fit the face," he pointed out. "But to begin at the beginning. Three or more months ago, the Federals learned that Arthur Loden, a well-known and respected chemist, probably was the head of a dope ring. But by the time they had collected some evidence, Arthur Loden was in Florida."

"And collected a beautiful sun-tan," said Big Jim O'Grady.

"He got wise the Feds were looking for him, so he checked out, saying he was going on a fishing trip south. That was the last the Feds heard of him, but they are still looking. Some word came to certain members of his gang that he had been killed in an automobile accident, but none of them knew for sure.

"When 'Mr. Parks' appeared at my shop a month ago, his face was bandaged. He said he had been badly cut in an auto wreck. There would be scars. But from the scars I saw it looked to me more as if he had recently undergone a face-changing operation. I didn't let on, though, that I had noticed that when he said he wanted his hair trimmed differently to conceal some scars near his ears.

"I did some snooping, and one of the things I learned was that a girl I knew, a girl nearly everybody in the Village knew — Carmelita, the Red Goose Club strip-teaser — had been the girl-friend of this Arthur Loden who had been killed or had taken it on the lam. I also found out that for some time Carmelita had been the tip-off to dope addicts that certain roasted chestnut vendors would sell them the stuff in whole chestnuts concealed in bags of roasted ones.

"And that was what caused the killing of John Macklin, the Fed. Carmelita had misjudged him, had believed he was an addict, and had tipped him off to buy from Tinker

Modoc in Circle Street. The gang that were always on the watch, though, recognized Macklin when he showed up to buy chestnuts from Tinker—so they blasted him. It was also a good idea to rub out Tinker, who was a weak sister who might talk, and to remove all the loaded chestnuts.

"I found one in the hand of the Fed after he had been murdered, but was robbed of it. I don't know why I was not killed at the same time, unless it was thought I had just happened to find that chestnut, and didn't know what it was all about. The fact that Mr. Parks—Arthur Loden—was with me at the time, may have been coincidence. I don't know. But I do know that Parks wanted to get from under, didn't even want to be a witness, for his one idea was to go on with his racket with a new face and new name."

BIG JIM O'GRADY scratched an ear, his frown puzzled.

"But how did Parks, or Arthur Loden, plan to get away with it?" he asked.

"Simply enough," said Little Joe. "He wrote to Carmelita that he was going to South America. She was to join him when he sent for her. He had no intention of ever seeing her again, of course, for by now there was another girl.

"Naturally I didn't know that—then—but I did know, from trimming Mr. Parks' hair, that he was having more than accident scars removed from his face. He had a new face, and was having all the sun-tan bleached from his body as well. With the different type of haircut, low on the cheeks to conceal some of the scars, and tapered instead of rounded at the back, Arthur Loden would be as dead as if he had been cremated."

"Facial surgery and a different haircut could do that?" asked Big Jim.

"Well, when Carmelita came to my shop and met him face to face, she failed to identify him as Arthur

Loden, her ex-boy-friend, the man she had suspected by now had double-crossed her. Some of the gang who liked her better than they liked Loden had tipped her off that Loden had had another girl before he was supposed to have been killed, so she was not sure he *was* dead.

"Also, she had picked up an idea that I might know something about Loden—just what, neither she nor the gang knew. But they did know I still had one of the chestnuts that had been in Tinker's cart when the Fed was killed.

"When Macklin was killed, Carmelita got scared, afraid she might be involved. She had been watching when I found that other loaded chestnut. So she came to my place to take me for a ride—after she found out how much I knew, and whether I *did* know anything about Loden. And because she thought I would never have a chance to talk again, she talked freely herself, before she was bumped off. She was pretty bitter at Arthur Loden."

"And in the meantime, either as Mr. Parks, or under some other name, Arthur Loden was all set to again take up some legitimate business as a cover for a new dope ring," supplied Big Jim. "As a matter of fact, we found papers on him showing that, as Truman Parks, he had bought a cleaning and dyeing shop. Having never been pinched as Arthur Loden, and the Feds finding no prints at his chemical lab or in his room, after he went to Florida, Truman Parks was all set to become a new character altogether, with those of his old dope ring he wanted, and new members.

"The chestnut dope racket having been nailed, the ring would have switched to some other device. What's more, we found other papers on him that showed where he'd had his new face made, and was being bleached. That was a big mistake—keeping that kind of a doctor's bill."

(Concluded on page 112)



OFFICIAL BUSINESS

A DEPARTMENT WHERE READERS
AND THE EDITOR MEET

MANY things are likely to happen in the neighborhood of Times Square on New Year's Eve. But one thing a couple of Uncle Sam's soldiers don't expect when they're out celebrating is a slight case of murder!

Private First Class Tony Webb was the sort of a fellow who had lived close to New York most of his life, before shifting over to Uncle Sam's Army, and in that time nothing very much had ever happened to him.

But when he went for a stroll in the Fifties with his pal, Dave Cotter, the spell was broken—and how!

First there was the gorgeous gal who came out of the night club and ran right into his arms, paying off with a big kiss. Then there was the two gunmen who didn't seem to like Tony Webb's interest in the girl. But the boys in the U. S. Army have the answer for people who are a bit careless where they point their guns. Tony Webb was no exception.

Murder Strikes a Blow!

What happened then? Well, when Tony had disposed of the duo of thugs, he found the girl missing, and her trail led from the night club to a Greenwich Village party, and then by way of a rather confused trail to an uptown apartment where grim murder had already struck a tragic blow.

That's a time table of the first part of the action in Marvin Ryerson's stirring novelet, **MURDER ON FURLOUGH**.

The events that take place on this particular New Year's Eve are impor-

tant to Soldiers Webb and Cotter, and to the security of the United States. Just why, is going to give you one of the real detective story thrills you've been looking for!

Private Webb and Cotter aren't the usual type of detective story heroes. They don't sound like detectives at all. As a matter of fact, they're not. But that's one of the things that makes this story doubly fascinating. You don't have to worry about a couple of fellows who are going to dabble in criminology while action is going on all about them.

The solution is a real bang-up surprise that you'll remember for a long time. You'll get a kick out of **MURDER ON FURLOUGH** by Marvin Ryerson, in the next issue of **POPULAR DETECTIVE**.

Joe Bunt Again

Another novelet that you'll like is **A CORPSE WON'T TALK**, by Laurence Donovan. Yep, this is another story of the fascinating and effective adventures of Joe Bunt, the Barber. Joe takes his criminology seriously, and thereby balances our soldier heroes mentioned above. But there are times when Joe's text book isn't complete and detailed enough.

Then he has to give his common sense free rein, and let it carry him through.

If you've already met Joe Bunt in earlier issues of **POPULAR DETECTIVE** you know you're in for a fast-paced, punch filled story. If Joe is a newcomer to your detec-



tive fiction family, I'm sure you're going to like him, and his red-headed girl-friend Della Corcoran, not to mention Della's brother Mike, the taxi driver. They're all the kind of people you're likely to meet on your own block, and the difficulties that confront them might well be a part of your own experience.

This time we find Joe Bunt getting himself mixed up in a murder maze that contains threads leading to Atlee Harden, the shrunken, ratty money lender of Greenwich Village, to Hugh Tolan, the uptown Beau Brummel, and half a dozen others who come into Joe's life.

Joe tries to figure out the importance of a toupee, and finds that when you're trying to get a good grip on a killer, a wig doesn't provide much in the way of a hand-hold.

Della Corcoran is one of those Irish lassies who doesn't like to think of any other woman coming into Joe's life, and when Trixie, the manicurist takes more than a professional interest in the young barber, there are complications that a killer might well have avoided. Those are the elements, boys and girls, and author Donovan has sure taken them in hand, and woven a story pattern that will be sure-fire drama for you.

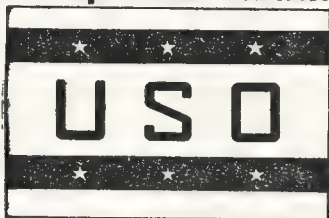
You'll like the way Joe Bunt goes about his sleuthing, and best of all you'll like the results he gets in **A CORPSE WON'T TALK**, by Laurence Donovan, in the next issue.

A Guilt Picture

A blonde leads Joe Harrigan into a murder frame, and he finds a guilt picture—in **DEATH TAKES NO**

[Turn page]

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Joe visits the blonde to let her know she's the object of his client's interest. He accidentally leans up against the door, and it opens—to reveal a corpse in the foyer! The corpse of his client, to whom he's just spoken on the phone a minute ago!

It doesn't make sense, but Joe Harrigan determines to clear up the mess—and how he does it, and arrives at a million-dollar solution, makes **DEATH TAKES NO HOLIDAY**, by W. T. Ballard, one of the most exciting and entertaining yarns we've ever given you. You'll enjoy every bit of it.

Other Thrilling Stories

In addition to these three first-rate detective novelets, we're also bringing you Joe Archibald's latest story of Willie Klump, the hen-pecked detective. It's called **PHYSICAL WRECKED** and you'll probably



feel slightly wrecked after you've stopped holding your sides with laughter.

Willie is in his usual form when he tries to solve a murder case that leads into a Civilian Defense and Red Cross First Aid Class. But his form has undergone numerous changes before he manages to unravel himself from the bandages the knowing young ladies have draped around it.

In a spot like this, anyone like Satchelfoot Kelly, Klump's pal on the city police force, might be discouraged, but Willie is built of sterner stuff, and long after Satchelfoot has gone into hibernation behind a flat-topped desk, Willie is still on the scent, and closing in on the criminals.

For our regular renewal of the feud between the redoubtable Willie and Satchelfoot, told in Joe Archibald's inimitable style, we bring you **PHYSICAL WRECKED** in the next issue of **POPULAR DETECTIVE**. And there'll be a number of other

[Turn page]

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good, fast-moving detective thrillers to round out the issue.

Letters to the Editor

Thanks a lot for all those letters you fellows and gals have been shooting in to Ye Editor. It's the kind of thing that we like to see here, and we want to encourage you to send more of them along. Generally speaking, our readers seem to think we're doing a pretty good job, but we're just as happy to hear from those who offer criticism. Here are a few excerpts from recent letters.

You have an okay writer in **E. Hoffmann Price**. His story, "Death For a Dime" was just what the doctor ordered—for people with strong hearts. Let's see more of this author.—**L. R. Sebold, Winnetka, Ill.**

And here's one from out on the Pacific Coast, where they're on the front veranda when the Jappos come over for a bit of shelling.

Hurray for **Willie Klump**! I'm sure that if his attention could be directed toward the Japs and the Nazis, he'd have them all polished off before **Gertie Mudgett** could sling two plates of hash. "The Fire Bug" was

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one of the hottest stories Joe Archibald's turned out in a long time, and I'm not kidding you either.—Philip Quinlan, Portland, Oregon.

Next we'll have to turn on the electric fan to cool off one of the irate customers who feels he has a squawk on the August issue of POPULAR DETECTIVE.

That story, "Take It Easy, Tony" by Thomas Thursday, was certainly a Lulu. I'm trying to figure out how an author could get so many mistakes into a three-page yarn. We find Tony telling Pete to meet him near the theatre with a car, and to wait there for fifteen minutes after two o'clock. Then when Tony gets to the theatre, and thinks the manager has been murdered, he immediately begins to wonder where Pete is. There's no explanation of why the manager of the theatre should be in the place

[Turn page]

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at two o'clock in the morning. Sounds as though Tony, Tim, and the author were all working on false conclusions.—George Rodman, Lubeck, Maine.

Sure sounds as though Tom Thursday is going to have a lot of explaining to do. Maybe he wanted us to believe that if Pete Wales had actually stolen the money, he wouldn't wait around for Tony to come along. In any case, we appreciate your cogent comments. Write us again.

Let's hear your ideas about our stories and authors. We're mighty glad to get these letters and postcards, and will print excerpts from some of the most interesting ones in each issue. Simply address your communications to The Editor, **POPULAR DETECTIVE**, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. Thank you!

—THE EDITOR.

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Private Detective Joe Harrigan Finds the Picture of Guilt in a Murder Frame



IN

DEATH TAKES NO HOLIDAY

A Gripping Mystery Novelet

By W. T. BALLARD

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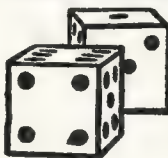
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MIND OVER MURDER (Concluded from page 103)

"His biggest mistake," said Little Joe, "was in doublecrossing his girlfriend, Carmelita, and having her rubbed out. Evidently he feared that in some manner she might discover him, in spite of his new identity, and he certainly knew her vindictiveness."

"Joey, precious," said red-headed Della Corcoran, "you wouldn't ever doublecross me, would you? You're supposed to be a hero again, but how about the night you stood me up and said you had blonde troubles? How about it?"

"Some of these days," muttered Little Joe, "the Village will have plenty of reason to call me the Mad Barber."

A Wig of Death Presents a Puzzling Crime Problem to the Barber Sleuth



IN

A CORPSE WON'T TALK

Another Complete Joe Bunt Novelet
By LAURENCE DONOVAN

COMING NEXT ISSUE

Power Without Horses

Uncle Sam is going all-out on gliders—men are needed!

THE United States Army is now going all-out on gliders. The deadly technique of landing companies, regiments and even full divisions of men silently from the sky which the Germans used so successfully in Crete last year is to be turned against them when the great invasion of Europe finally gets under way.

The advantages of glider attack are obvious—the ships are economical to build and easy to replace—the element of surprise is immense, for no detector can pick up the approach of a motorless plane and gliders can be released from a towing ship while miles away from their objective and still hit it on the nose.

What is needed are men—for a man's job.

As this force—exact numbers, naturally cannot be given—is planned to number about a hundred thousand men, the field is wide open. Here are the qualifications for membership:

The applicant must be a citizen of the United States between the ages of 18 and 35 years, inclusive. He must be able to pass the physical and mental requirements. Formerly, prior flight training was considered essential, but these restrictions have been removed in order to give everyone a chance to qualify as a glider-pilot, regardless of the extent of previous experience.

He must be in reasonably good condition—though the bars are a bit lower than for the regular Air Forces—reasonably well educated and intelligent and must be up to Army requirements. He will be given training, first at a CAA school on light planes with emphasis on dead stick landings, then get down to intensive training with gliders themselves.

Those who graduate successfully, be they civilians or Army men, will be given at least staff sergeant's rating with full flight pay. And, as it is a new service, commissions are going to come more rapidly than in other services at least until officer ranks are filled.

As we just said, it's a man's job and a great privilege—a chance to get in the first whack at the Axis—and the rewards are great. Let's go, fellows. Keep 'em gliding!

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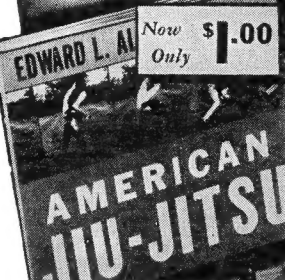
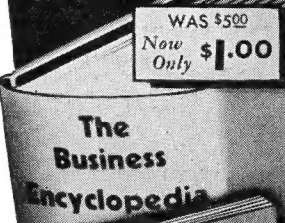
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